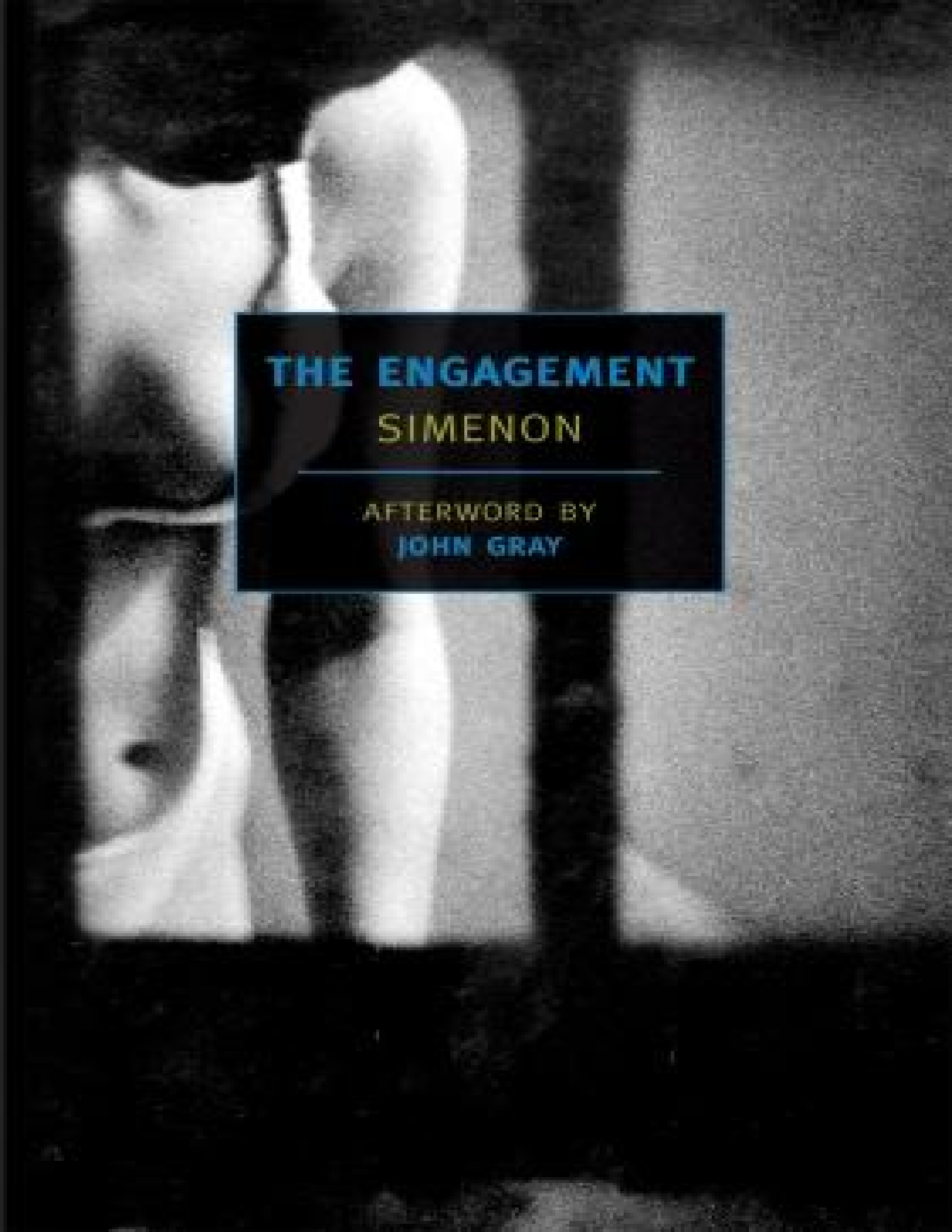


THE ENGAGEMENT

SIMENON

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MR. HIRE'S ENGAGEMENT

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MR. HIRE'S ENGAGEMENT

I

THE concierge gave a slight cough before she knocked, and then announced, looking at the *Belle Jardiniere* catalogue in her hand:

'A letter for you, Mr. Hire.'

And she gathered her shawl over her chest. Someone was moving on the other side of the brown door. Now to left, now to right, now footsteps, then a soft rustling of cloth or a rattle of crockery, and the grey eyes of the concierge seemed to be following the invisible trail of sound, through the partition. At last the sounds came closer. The key turned in the lock. A rectangle of light appeared, a strip of yellow-flowered wallpaper, the polished marble of a washbasin. A man held out his hand, but the concierge did not see him, or scarcely saw him, paid no attention to him, in any case, for her prying eyes were fixed on something else: a bloodstained towel, lying dark-red on the pale marble.

The closing door pushed her gently backwards. The key turned once more and the concierge went down the four flights of stairs, pausing in thought from time to time. She was thin. Her clothes hung around her as though from the crossed sticks of a scarecrow's frame-work, and her nose was damp, her eyelids red, her hands chapped with the cold.

Inside the lodge, which had a glass-panelled door, a little girl in a flannel petticoat was standing in front of a chair with a basin of water on it. Her brother, already dressed, was amusing himself by splashing her with water, and the table beside them was not yet cleared.

The door clicked as it opened. The little boy looked round. The little girl held up a tearful face.

'You just wait . . .'

A slap for the boy, whom his mother then pushed outside.

'You get along to school. As for you, if you don't stop crying…'

She shook the little girl and bundled her into her frock, tugging at her arms as though she were a puppet. Then she hid the basin of soapy water in the cupboard, went across to the door, came back again.

'Are you going to stop snivelling?'

She was thinking. She was hesitating. She was frowning and her little eyes were uneasy. She nodded automatically to the second-floor tenant as he walked past the lodge, and suddenly, flinging a second shawl over her shoulders, she half-closed the front of the stove and darted out towards the street.

It was freezing. Along the main road to Fontainebleau, which runs through Villejuif, the cars were driving slowly because of the icy surface, and steam was rising from their radiators. A hundred yards to the left was the cross-roads, with its *bistro* on either side, its policeman in the middle, the bustling suburban streets leading straight to Paris, with their trams, buses and cars. But to the right, after two houses, immediately past the last garage, was the open road, the countryside with trees and hoar-frosted fields.

The concierge shivered, hesitated again. She made a slight sign to a man standing at the street corner, but he did not see her, and so she ran across, touched his arm. 'Come in for a minute.'

She went back to the house, taking no further notice of him, grabbed her daughter by one arm and hoisted her onto a chair in a corner of the room, to get her out of the way.

'Come in. Don't stay there, he might see you.' She was either out of breath or very agitated. She glanced to and fro from the outside corridor to the man, who looked about thirty years old and had not taken his hat off.

'Yesterday I still wasn't sure, but I've just seen something and now I'm dead certain it's Mr. Hire.'

'Which is he?'

'Short, rather stout, with a curly moustache, and always carries a black briefcase under his arm.'

'What's his job?'

'We don't know. He goes out every morning and comes back at night. I took him up a catalogue, and while the door was ajar I noticed a towel all covered with blood . . .'

For the last fortnight the inspector, with two colleagues, had been spending his days and sometimes his nights in the district, watching everybody, and he was beginning to know the local people by sight. 'And apart from this towel. . .' he began. The concierge was ill at ease.

'You remember. I thought of him the very first day, the Sunday. The woman had just been found on that waste ground. Your colleague

questioned me along with all the other concierges. Well, Mr. Hire didn't go out that day! Which means he had nothing to eat, because on Sundays he goes to the delicatessen shop in the Rue Gambetta to get what he needs. In the afternoon he didn't stir. Careful. . .'

Steps were heard on the stairs. The passage outside the glass-panelled door was dark, but nevertheless a shortish man could be seen going past, with a briefcase under his left arm. The concierge and the inspector both bent forward, both frowned, then the policeman went out quickly, ran a few paces towards the pale daylight of the street, came back unhurriedly.

'He has a big strip of sticking-plaster on one cheek.'

'I noticed that.'

The concierge's stony eyes were gazing at something far off, something inward rather than exterior.

'So that's not it,' went on the man, making as if to leave.

But a feverish hand grasped his arm. The concierge was more and more ill at ease, perhaps through the effort of memory she was making.

'Wait! I want to be sure ... I looked chiefly at the towel, but...'

Her face contorted like that of a medium in a trance. Her voice grew slower and softer. The little girl slid off her chair.

'I could swear that when I gave him the catalogue he hadn't cut himself. I didn't look him full in the face, but all the same I could see him and I think it would have struck me . . .'

She was still frantically racking her brain. The inspector frowned.

'Aha! You mean he saw you looking at the towel and that gave him the idea of. . .'

In the lodge, standing beside the table with its brown oilcloth cover, they were each inflaming the other. They were less than two hundred yards from the waste ground where, one Sunday morning, a fortnight before, a woman's body had been found, so badly mutilated that identification was impossible.

'What time will he get home?'

'At ten past seven.'

To the right of the crossroads, near the tram terminus, was a row of barrows, and Mr. Hire, his briefcase under his arm, was moving with his waddling gait among the housewives, passing in turn a butcher's stall, then vegetables, then more meat, then a barrow with nothing but cauliflowers. The tram-conductor blew his whistle and Mr. Hire began to run, like a man

unused to running, kicking his legs out sideways like a woman. As he ran he called:

'Hey! . . . Hey! . . .'

The tram-conductor hauled him aboard in the nick of time. Standing near the front of the tram was a second inspector, scrutinizing the passengers who got in, and slapping his hands on his thighs to warm himself. Seeing Mr. Hire's sticking-plaster, he first screwed up his eyes, then opened them very wide, turned for a second to stare down the street, and finally, just as the tram began to move, jumped onto the step.

Blood, and even traces of skin, had been found under the dead woman's finger-nails, and for lack of any other clue, the police report had contained the instruction: 'Keep a specially close watch on men with scratches on their face.'

Mr. Hire was sitting in his usual place at the end of the car and his briefcase lay on his knees; he was reading the newspaper. As usual, too, he had his ticket ready in his hand, and held it out to the conductor without even raising his head.

He was not big. He was fat. His bulk was no greater than an average man's, but he seemed to have neither bones nor flesh, nothing but some smooth, soft substance, so smooth and so soft that it made his movements somehow equivocal.

His round face displayed a pair of very red lips, a small moustache curled with a curling-iron, as though it had been drawn in Indian ink, and the symmetrical rosy cheeks of a doll.

He took no notice of his surroundings. He did not know that an inspector was watching him. At the Porte d'Italie he got out, as though an instinct had warned him he had reached his destination, and he slipped through the crowd again, with jaunty self-assured step, his shoulders swaying, went down the Métro steps and, arriving on the platform, plunged once more into his newspaper.

He was reading as he stepped into the train the moment it stopped, went on reading as he travelled, standing up in a corner of the carriage, changed trains at République and finally got out at Voltaire.

The inspector followed him all the way, without much conviction, but feeling he was no worse off there than at the Villejuif crossroads.

Mr. Hire went down the Rue Saint-Maur, turned to the left and dived into a courtyard cluttered with barrels, at the far end of which he disappeared.

The courtyard was old, so was the house. Enamel plates announced the presence of a cooper, a carpenter and a printer. A saw and a printing-press could be heard at work. The inspector could see no concierge and paused for a moment on the pavement. His attention was caught by a reddish glow on the cobbles. Turning round, he noticed that a light had been switched on behind some barred windows at ground-level, and at the same moment he saw Mr. Hire, taking off his overcoat and muffler, putting them away in a cupboard, and advancing towards a plain deal table.

The place was not quite a cellar, not quite a ground-floor. The courtyard sloped downwards, and the room Mr. Hire had entered was thus three feet below the level of the street. It was funny, because the pavement seemed to cut the little man short at the waist. The only light came from a weak, unshaded electric bulb hanging from the ceiling, which spread a yellowish glow, and no sounds penetrated to the street.

Mr. Hire looked calm and placid. Seated in front of a heap of letters, he was opening them, one after another, carefully, using a paper-knife. He was not reading them, merely placing the actual letters to his right, and to his left the money-order enclosed in each envelope. He was not smoking. Twice he got up to stoke a small stove.

The inspector went round the courtyard looking for a concierge, but the printer told him there wasn't one. When he came out on the pavement again, Mr. Hire, just below one of his barred windows, was doing up parcels, with precise movements. All the parcels were, indeed, identical.

Mr. Hire was taking a white wooden box from one place, a printed leaflet from another, then six post cards from six separate heaps, and wrapping the whole thing up in the twinkling of an eye, tying it with red string from a ball that hung level with his head.

The policeman went to the nearest *bistro* and drank a couple of glasses of rum. When he got back, about twenty parcels had been made up. By noon there were sixty.

And Mr. Hire slowly put on his outdoor things, emerged onto the pavement, went to a restaurant in the Boulevard Voltaire, where he settled down like a regular customer, and ate his meal reading his newspaper.

At two o'clock he was doing up parcels again. At half-past three he was writing addresses on labels, and about four o'clock he began sticking the labels on the parcels.

He then made all the little packages into one big one, and on the stroke of five o'clock he walked into the post office and joined the queue in front of the 'registered printed matter' counter.

The clerk did not even weigh the packets. He was used to them. Mr. Hire paid and went out, now carrying only his briefcase. The inspector was getting bored. Because of the cold, he had drunk nine or ten glasses of rum since morning.

But Mr. Hire had not finished. With the same automatic precision he climbed into a bus, got out at the *Matin* office, and handed a sheet of paper and thirty francs to the woman in charge of the 'classified advertisements', who did not even look at him, she had doubtless seen him so many times before.

The boulevards were less crowded than usual. People were collected round charcoal braziers. The asphalt was white with frost. Mr. Hire swayed slightly as he walked, not noticing the women who brushed past him. He turned down the Rue de Richelieu, went into the *Journal* office, and laid a ready-prepared sheet and thirty francs on the counter for 'classified advertisements'. '

The inspector had had enough of this. At the risk of losing his man, he rushed over to the counter as soon as Mr. Hire had left it, and showed his card.

'Let me see the advertisement.'

The women handed it to him as a matter of course. It was made out in fine, clear writing.

'Eighty to a hundred Francs a day for easy work without leaving present employment. Write Mr. Hire, *67,* Rue Saint-Maur, Paris'

The two men were reunited at the entrance to the Bourse Métro station, where they went down the steps one behind the other. Still one behind the other, they came out of the subway at the Porte d'Italie. Mr. Hire was reading an evening paper. The inspector stared sourly at him.

In the tram they sat side by side. It was five past seven when Mr. Hire got out at the Villejuif terminus and began to walk home, where he went into the house with the most innocent air imaginable.

The inspector went in after him, pushed open the concierge's glass-panelled door, grunted to his colleague, who was drinking a bowl of hot coffee: 'What are you doing here?'

'And you?'

The little boy was busy with his homework on a corner of the table. The room was badly lit by one lamp. The postman had just deposited a heap of circulars on the oilcloth, beside the blue enamel coffee-pot. 'Mr. Hire?'

'You too?'

The concierge glanced from one to the other, her face painfully drawn.

'You think it's him, don't you? Oh, heavens! . . .' She was going to cry. She was crying. They were only tears of nervousness so far, but her thin hands were trembling.

'I'm frightened . . . Don't go away . . . For the last two weeks I've been terrified to death . . .'

Her son was watching her over his exercise-book. The little girl was sitting on the floor.

'A cup of coffee?' suggested the inspector who had been there first. And he poured one out for his fellow-officer. 'What put you on the track?'

'That cut... Then his job ... He's one of those fellows who promise goodness knows how much a day for easy work and then, in return for fifty or sixty francs, send people a paintbox worth twenty, and six post cards for them to colour .. .'

The concierge was disappointed by this. The first inspector stood up, filling the lodge with his bulk.

'It seems there's a bloodstained towel. What I'd like to know is, whether he really cut himself.'

They didn't know what to do. One of them poured himself a drop more coffee.

'I wouldn't dare to pass him on the stairs again,' breathed the concierge. 'In any case I've always felt frightened of him. Everybody has!'...

'Does he ever go out?'

'Only on Sundays. I think he goes to the cinema.'

'Does he ever have any visitors?'

'Never.'

'And who does his housework?'

'He does. I've never been able to get into his room. It must have been by mistake that that catalogue came for him this morning, it's never come before, and I wanted the chance of having a look. I called through the door to say there was a letter…'

The men looked at each other in perplexity.

'You simply must do something, arrest him, or something, I don't know! But I can't go on living with the idea that. . . Why, when he goes past he often pats my little girl on the head. And that frightens me, just as though . . .'

She was crying properly now, without mopping her eyes, for she was making up the stove. They could hear the sound of cars going along the road, further off, the bells of the trams. It was hot, but their feet were frozen.

'Suppose we made an excuse and went up?'

They were ill at ease.

'It might be better to fetch him down. Look, you go and tell him someone wants to speak to him.'

'Me? Never! No, never! . . .'

She was trembling, crying half-heartedly, with short sobs.

'I haven't even a husband to take care of me. At night everything's dead here, except the cars that rush by at about sixty miles an hour.

She pulled her daughter to her feet with a single movement.

'Sit up on a chair.'

'Are you sure he didn't have that cut this morning?'

'I don't know. I don't think he had. I could swear he hadn't. I've been thinking about it all day, till my head aches . . .'

'Shall we go up, old chap?'

There was no need. Someone was coming down the stairs. The concierge listened for a second, rushed to the door and opened it.

'Mr. Hire!'

She was shivering, standing behind the open door, looking at the two men as though to say:

'It's your turn now.'

'Excuse me . . .'

Mr. Hire hesitated apologetically in the doorway, took two steps forward, surprised, embarrassed.

'What can I . . .?'

He could not see the concierge, hidden behind the door. The inspectors nudged each other. The little girl, who was staring at him, suddenly burst into tears.

'Did somebody call me?'

'Just in case. My cousin told me you had hurt yourself. . .' This was the first inspector, throwing himself blindly into the breach. He was pale, and swallowed hard between his words. 'I work in a hospital, and . . .'

And to cut matters short, he reached out roughly, clumsily, seized the corner of the sticking-plaster and ripped it off. They were all crowded together in the cramped lodge. The little girl yelled more loudly than ever.

As for Mr. Hire, he clapped his hand to his cheek and brought it away covered with blood. Drops had already fallen on his collar, on the shoulder of his jacket. The blood spurted, red and fresh, pushing the edges of the cut further and further apart as it flowed. 'Whatever . . .'

The concierge was clenching her hands as though the fingers would snap. The inspector was horrified at the sight of the sharp, fresh razor- gash.

'Oh, excuse me . . . I . . .'

He looked round for the tap, for a handkerchief, anything that would stop the bleeding and get the thing over. Mr. Hire's eyes were round, with dark pupils. He gazed from one to the other of the occupants of the lodge, and he too was at a loss how to staunch all this blood, big drops of which had by this time fallen on the concrete floor.

The little boy was still in his seat, in front of his exercise-book, his pen in mid-air. His sister was rolling on the ground.

'It was ... it was clumsy of me ... if you will allow me to arrange it for you ...'

Mr. Hire looked unlike himself, with blood covering his cheek and still trickling over his chin as though his lip had been split. And he was upset. The round, rosy spots had faded from his cheeks. 'Thank you . .'

He actually seemed to be apologizing, like someone who has unintentionally spilt something in a house to which he has been invited. He bumped into the doorpost. 'You stay here ... I'll go and . .

The inspector had found a dishcloth and held it out to him. 'Thank you . . . thank you . . . I'm sorry .. .' He was already out in the cold, dark passage, and they heard him mount the stairs with a heavy, hesitant tread; they seemed to see the drops of blood falling on the steps.

'Oh, stop that!' the concierge suddenly yelled, slapping her daughter. Her hair was coming down, her expression vacant. She shook the little boy.

'And you, sitting there without a word!'

The inspectors did not know where to look.

'Please don't worry. To-morrow morning the superintendent. ..'

'Do you really think I'm going to spend the night all alone here? Do you really think that?'

She was clearly on the verge of hysteria. It was only a question of seconds. She started, as she accidentally put her hand on a drop of blood which had splashed onto the table. 'We'll stay . . . That is, one of us . . .'

She could not decide whether to calm down. She looked at them and they tried to assume an air of decision. 'You go along and report.'

The water had been boiling for the last quarter of an hour. The glass panes were misted over. 'But mind you come back!'

The concierge took the kettle off the stove and stirred up the red-hot coals with a poker.

'I've not been able to sleep for the last two weeks,' she concluded. 'You've seen him. I'm not crazy . . .'

II

When the blood at last stopped flowing, Mr. Hire was obliged to move with caution, holding his head very straight, so as not to reopen the wound. One end of his moustache was drooping, and blood-stained water had spread a pink colour-wash over his face.

Mr. Hire first emptied the washbasin and wiped it out with a duster. Then his eye lighted on the iron stove, which was out. Except for his motionless head, which he carried on his shoulders like a foreign body, he was exactly as he had been in the tram, in the Métro and in the cellar in the Rue Saint-Maur, all his movements calm and measured, as though decreed by the successive rites of some ceremony.

He took a newspaper from his overcoat pocket, crumpled it up, and pushed it down into the stove. On the black marble mantelpiece was a bundle of kindling-wood, which he arranged on top of the paper. He was surrounded by silence and cold. The only sounds were those he made by knocking against the poker or the coal-scuttle. He knelt down, still with head held up, his neck rigid, to push a match under the grid and set light to the paper. He groped. He struck three matches before he was successful, and the smoke came oozing out of every chink in the stove.

It was colder in the room than outside. While waiting for the stove to warm up, Mr. Hire put on his overcoat again, a heavy coat of black cloth with a velvet collar, and he opened the cupboard that served him as a

kitchen, lit a gas ring, poured water into a saucepan. His hand found what he wanted, without his looking for the things. He put a bowl, a knife and a plate on the table; then, after a moment's thought, put the plate back on its shelf, doubtless remembering that the incident in the concierge's lodge had prevented him from doing his shopping.

He still had some bread and some butter. He took some ready- ground coffee out of a biscuit tin, wrinkled his brows, looked at the stove, which had stopped smoking and was no longer roaring as before. The wood had burnt up and the coal had not caught. There was no more wood on the mantelpiece. Mr. Hire frowned; then he poured the boiling water from the saucepan onto the coffee and warmed his hands over that.

On the right of the room there was a bed, a washbasin and a bedside table; on the left, the cupboard containing the gas-ring, and a table covered with an oilcloth.

Mr. Hire sat down at this table and began to eat bread and butter and drink coffee, sedately, gazing straight in front of him. When he had finished he sat motionless for an instant, as though stuck fast in time and space. Noises began to be heard, slight and unidentifiable at first, creakings, steps, hangings, and before long the whole world surrounding the room was astir with furtive sound.

In the next-door flat plates were rattling and people were talking. The queer thing was that the sound of the plates was not distorted in the least It seemed to come from within this same room, whereas the voices were fused in a deep-toned, mechanical-sounding murmur.

Downstairs, as usual in the evening, a little boy was playing the violin, the same exercises being practised over and over again. There, too, a rumbling voice was heard at times to make him try once more.

Then there was the road, the gradual sucking noise of a car rushing forward from afar, the sharp sound as it passed-the house, drawn rapidly on into space on the far horizon. Only the heavy lorries moved slowly, crashing by so that you held your breath as the whole house shook.

But all this activity seethed outside the walls. Within the room itself was a compact body of silence, firmly welded, unimpaired, and Mr. Hire sitting over his empty cup, was probably awaiting the end of the comfortable sensation the hot coffee had given him.

At last he got up, buttoned his overcoat, wound a scarf round his neck. He took the bowl from which he had been drinking and washed it under the

tap, wiped it with a dish-cloth that hung from a nail, and put it away in the cupboard. He swept the breadcrumbs onto a piece of cardboard, greasy from this habitual usage, threw them into the stove, went over to the bed and turned it down.

What else was there to be done? Wind the alarm-clock, which made a splash of white on the mantelpiece and now marked half-past eight.

Was that all? He took off his shoes and polished them, sitting on the edge of the bed, his neck still held stiffly, his left cheek tinned upwards.

Yes, that was all. The little boy began his exercise over again, and the bow scraped on a second string. The man next door must be reading the newspaper aloud, for his murmuring voice ran on, as monotonously as a running tap.

Mr. Hire left his uncomfortable perch on the bed, settled down in the arm-chair, facing the dead stove and the face of the alarm-clock, and made no further movement except to thrust his hands, which had been freezing on the arms of the chair, into his pockets.

Ten minutes to nine... Nine o'clock... Five past nine ... He never once closed his eyes. He wasn't looking at anything. It was as though he were in a train which would take him nowhere. He didn't even sigh. A little warmth was at last accumulating inside his overcoat, and he hugged it closely to him, while his toes, in the bedroom slippers were stiff with cold.

Twenty past nine . . . twenty-five past. . . twenty-six past. . .

A door banged from time to time. People went downstairs, so noisily that they seemed to be stumbling on every step. Gradually things became so quiet that the policeman's whistle could be heard from the crossroads.

Nine twenty-seven . . . Mr. Hire rose, turned off the electric light, and, in the dark, found his way back to his arm-chair, whence he could now see nothing but the vaguely luminous hands of the alarm-clock.

Not until ten o'clock did he become impatient, and then only to the extent that his fingers moved inside his pockets. The next-door tenants were asleep, but somewhere else a baby was crying, and its mother was crooning to soothe it:

'La ... la ... la ... la .. .'

Mr. Hire got up and walked to the window, outside which all was dark. Shortly afterwards a light was switched on, scarcely three yards away, a window lit up a bedroom whose smallest details were thus revealed.

The woman closed the door behind her with a kick that must have produced a thunderous bang, but the noise did not carry across the courtyard. She was in a hurry, in a bad temper perhaps, for it was with an abrupt movement that she lifted up the bedclothes to slip in a hot-water bottle she had been carrying under her arm.

Mr. Hire did not move. His own room was in darkness. He was standing up, his forehead pressed against the icy window-pane, and only his eyes moved to and fro, watching his neighbour's every gesture.

When she had tucked in the bedclothes again, she proceeded to unpin her hair, which fell to her shoulders, not very long, but thick, auburn-coloured and silky. And she rubbed the back of her neck and her ears, stretching herself with a kind of sensual satisfaction.

There was a mirror in front of her, above a wooden dressing-table. It was into this that she was looking, into this that she continued to gaze as she pulled her black wool dress up by the hem, to draw it over her head. Then, dressed in her slip, she sat down on the edge of the bed to take off her stockings.

Even from Mr. Hire's room it was evident that she had goose-flesh, and having removed everything except her panties, she spent quite a time rubbing back some warmth into her nipples, which had shrivelled up with the cold.

She was young and vigorous. She picked up a long white nightdress which she put on before removing her panties, looked at herself again in the glass, took some cigarettes from the drawer in the bedside table.

She had never glanced towards the window. She did not do so now. She was already in bed, one elbow propped on the pillow, and before beginning to read the novel that lay beside her, she slowly lit a cigarette.

She was facing the courtyard, facing Mr. Hire, behind whom the alarm-clock was rigorously ticking away the seconds in vain and turning its phosphorescent hands.

Upon the bed there was a red eiderdown. Her head was slightly bent, and that emphasized the outline of her full lips, fore-shortened her rather low forehead, gave greater weight to the sensual mass of red hair, filled out her neck, created the impression that the woman was formed throughout of some rich pulp, full of sap.

Her hand, outside the nightdress, went on automatically caressing the nipple whose outline could be seen whenever she left it to remove the cigarette from her lips.

The alarm-clock gave a slight click at half-past ten, another at eleven o'clock. The only sounds now were the wails of the baby, whose feed had perhaps been forgotten, and the occasional aggressive whizz of a car hurtling along the high road.

The girl turned the pages, blew on the cigarette ash that sprinkled the eiderdown, to scatter it, and lit fresh cigarettes.

Mr. Hire never stirred, except to scratch away the mist of his breath as it formed on the window-pane and froze.

Above the courtyard, through the invisible sky, a limitless silence gradually spread.

The novel was finished at a quarter-past twelve, and the woman got up to put out the light.

That night the concierge got out of bed three times, and each time she lifted the curtain to make sure that the inspector was still pacing to and fro on the pavement blanched by the icy winds.

The frost-covered windows looked like ground glass. Twice, Mr. Hire's blue hands dropped the clothes-brush he was using on his overcoat; he knelt to tie up a bootlace, gave a glance round the room and shut the door of the cupboard, which was half open.

All that remained was to pick up his briefcase and put his hat on. His key in his pocket, he started off down the stairs, which creaked, for this was a new house, and jerry-built. Gloomy, too, for they had chosen to use iron-grey or dark brown paint. The pitch-pine steps refused to darken. In the middle they were dirty, nearly black, but at the sides, where nobody trod, they were still a shoddy white. The walls, instead of darkening, were shedding their plaster in patches.

There were rows of doors, a pitch-pine hand-rail, milk bottles on the landings. Everything echoed. Behind all these walls people were moving about, and some of the din suggested the struggles of giants. But it was merely the tenants getting dressed.

A draught of chillier air gave warning that the ground-floor was close by, and Mr. Hire went down the last steps, turned left, made an imperceptible pause.

The auburn-haired girl was there, leaning in the doorway of the lodge. Her cheeks looked all the rosier from having been out of doors since six o'clock that morning, and also in contrast to her white apron. She was still holding half a dozen empty milk-bottles, all their iron rings hooked on one finger.

Her head was half turned away. Hearing steps, she turned it completely, and went on talking to the concierge, who was inside the lodge.

Mr. Hire went by without a glance. When he had gone three yards there was a sudden silence behind him, and the concierge rushed feverishly into the passage.

Mr. Hire went on walking. In the cold air life seemed to have increased its pace, whites became whiter, greys lighter, blacks blacker.

He bought his newspaper at the stall and dived into the mass of humanity crowded on the pavement round the barrows.

'Sorry . .'

It was not spoken aloud. In fact, nothing could be heard, not even by himself. But it was a habit, a movement of his lips as he passed between two women, as he jostled someone, or knocked into the shaft of a barrow.

'Sorry. . '

The tram was there, waiting, and Mr. Hire moved faster, his chest thrust forward, his briefcase pressed close to his side; in the end he ran, as he always did for the last ten yards.

'Sorry . . '

He was not seeing people one by one. He was not noticing them individually. He went into the crowd, drove his way through it, advancing through a swarm of people with occasional unexpected gaps, empty patches of pavement where he could walk more quickly.

He was seated in his usual place in the tram, briefcase on his knees. He was just going to open his paper. His eyes travelled for a moment over the occupants of the tram, without pausing; yet Mr. Hire was frowning, shifting about, suddenly uncomfortable, ill at ease, awkward at unfolding the paper.

He could hardly restrain himself from passing a hand over his left cheek, so clearly did his present sensation evoke another, that of having his sticking-plaster torn off the previous evening, in the lodge: the man facing him at the other end of the car was one of the concierge's two companions.

Nevertheless, all the way to the Porte d'Italie he turned the pages of his paper. As usual, he followed the crowd that plunged down into the Métro.

And once on the platform, he went back to his reading.

An increasing clatter announced the arrival of a train. A carriage stopped in front of him. Doors crashed open. People jostled him.

'Sorry . . .'

He took one step forward, one step back. He still held his newspaper in front of him. He was on the platform. The doors closed again, the train glided forward. And in one of the coaches that slid past Mr. Hire's nose, a man was trying in vain to open a door and jump out.

The man in the tram, the man in the lodge, the man who pulled off the sticking-plaster!

Over the top of his paper, Mr. Hire watched the train disappear into the darkness; then he turned about, went up to the surface and crossed the square, entered a small café where he sat down near the window and ordered a cup of chocolate, very hot. His legs were shaky, as though he had been running for a long time. He gave a faint smile of thanks to the waiter who served him.

At noon he was still there, in the warmth, watching the streams of people go by, thousands of people walking, running, stopping, catching one another up, passing each other, shouting, whispering, while the waiters in the little bar seemed to be purposely clattering saucers together.

III

At five o'clock Mr. Hire went into his fourth *bistro*, without having left the Avenue d'Italie. From the first little bar he had gone to a *prix-fixe* restaurant, three doors further along. He had hesitated for a moment outside a cinema, but had settled instead in a *café-tabac* at the corner of the first side-street.

He had gone less than two hundred yards in all. Now he had taken his seat in a big, flashy establishment in the Place d'Italie, just as an orchestra was moving onto its platform. 'A *café crème'* he ordered.

He had not taken off his overcoat since the morning. He did not settle down comfortably. He perched on the edge of the seat as though he would only be staying a few minutes, and spent hours, just as he was, with no sign of impatience or boredom. But he must have been thinking, ceaselessly, furiously. Sometimes his hazel eyes would stare fixedly at some point in

space and his brow would quiver, his lips move imperceptibly, his hands clench in his pockets or on the marble top of the table.

He had thought so hard since the morning that by this time his mind was a blank. There were still people going past, noises, snatches of conversation. On his table he found a newspaper, folded in two, and read, upside-down: *'Villejuif Mystery.'*

The waiter brought his *café crème* and Mr. Hire smiled at him, drunk half the glass before allowing himself to look at the paper again. Then he got up and went to the cloakroom, merely so that he could turn the paper over, as though accidentally, as he went past. He took the opportunity of pressing the sticking-plaster more firmly on his cheek and giving a twist to his little moustache.

Back in his seat, he let five minutes go by before venturing a glance at the paper, which carried a long article.

'... for the last fortnight. . . complicated investigations . . . great step forward thanks to identification of the body... believed to be a certain Léonide Pacha, alias Lulu, a prostitute . . . theory that the murderer was a sex- maniac ... not rejected ... but the victim's handbag has not been found ... enquiries suggest that at the time of her death it contained two thousand francs fresh clue . . . investigation entering its final stage . . . great caution necessary . . .'

The orchestra struck up the 'Blue Danube'. As he picked up his cup, Mr. Hire knocked the paper off the table. The woman next to him bent to retrieve it. He said: 'Sorry . .. sorry ...' And he put the paper on the table again, the other way up.

'All by yourself?'

He was not looking at the woman, but he could see her as she sat beside him, a glass of beer in front of her. Out of discretion she made only the slightest turn in his direction, and she opened a small black patent-leather handbag, held it up to her face to powder her nose.

'We might be more comfortable somewhere else,' she added through motionless lips, looking at him over her mirror.

He tapped the table with a twenty-five centime piece and signed to the waiter.

'How much?'

'One franc fifty. Are you paying for the young lady's beer as well?'

He put down five francs on the table and left. Outside the lights were blazing, criss-crossing, making vertical and horizontal lines. The pavements, the trams, the buses were all packed with people. Mr. Hire his briefcase under his arm, walked towards the Porte d'Italie with his jerky step, weaving his way through the crowd without pausing, seeing nothing except rows of lamps, a jumble of shop-windows, and vague forms and faces trooping in the opposite direction.

He went past the Porte d'Italie, past the toll-house, and the little grey cloud formed by his breath floated in front of him. The lights became fewer, and when he turned to the right they dwindled to a few gas-lamps, like fireflies spaced out. He still moved forward at the same pace, and the deserted street sent his footsteps echoing back to him. He turned to the left, and this street was unfinished, only a few very tall houses, all new, with plots of waste ground separating them. The footpaths were not yet paved. Lean saplings, their stems wrapped in straw, had been planted along them.

Men were prowling beside the fence, one by one, Arabs for the most part, staring fixedly in the same direction, towards a light that lit up a square of pavement. It was the only light in the street, and the fact gave it a fairy-like quality. It shone from a big, fantastic-looking house, built entirely of glazed tiles like those used for delicatessen shops. It was white, with moonlike reflections. It looked as though it must contain something pink and good to eat. From every window, bright light was filtering through the slits in the shutters.

And Mr. Hire walked on, crossed the footpath without slowing down, went up the three steps and over the doormat, which set a bell ringing joyously.

Only then did he stop, a little out of breath, while specks of hoarfrost melted on his moustache. A second door opened of its own accord, with a light click, and he immediately stepped into the full light, a real bath of light, so brilliant, so full, so radiant that it seemed unreal.

The walls were white, the same smooth, gleaming white. The air was saturated with scented steam. A woman in a black satin dress with a serene, benevolent face under silvery hair, frowned for the briefest second, then smiled. 'Gisèle, I expect?'

He nodded. There was no more need of words. The woman pressed a button. The sound of a bell filled the hall. A very young girl, with wiry legs

clad in black stockings, opened the door a little way. 'Take this gentleman to No. 16.'

And she nodded, smiling, to Mr. Hire. Other bells were ringing by now. Mr. Hire followed the servant along a passage with numbered doors to either side. The mist was denser here. No. 7's door was open and revealed a bath full of hot water, with steam rising and covering the window-panes and walls in little drops.

A woman in a blue slip suddenly emerged from No. 12, both hands holding her breasts, which bounced as she ran. Someone in No. 14 was knocking on the door, and the little attendant cried:

'Coming—coming in a minute*!'*

The floor was tiled, and one could tell it had been washed with plenty of water, and soap. It was clean and scented. The servant's apron was stiff with starch.

'I'll go and fetch the things.'

Mr. Hire went in and sat down on a narrow cane-seated settee opposite the bath, both of whose taps the attendant had turned on before leaving the room. The water gushed out with a deafening noise. In the bath it turned pale green, the colour of some precious stones.

And in other cubicles water was running, in ten, perhaps twenty at the same time.

'Gisèle's coming. You might as well begin your bath.'

The servant-girl shut the door behind her. On the shelf she had put two white towels, a little cake of candy-pink soap, and a tiny bottle of eau de Cologne.

'Coming!' she cried to someone who called her from the far end of the corridor.

And a woman's voice said in the next room:

'It's a long time since you were here.'

It was hot, a singular kind of heat which filtered through the pores, the flesh, the brain. Almost at once it made your head swim, your ears redden, and imperceptibly constricted your throat.

Mr. Hire sat motionless, with his leather briefcase on his knee, watching the water mount higher and higher in the bath, and he jumped when there was a knock on the door.

'Are you ready?'

A face appeared, very dark, bare shoulders.

'All right! I'll be back in five minutes.'

Only then did he begin to undress, slowly. There were mirrors on two of the walls so he was presented with three or four reflections of his body, which gradually appeared, very white, plump, as smooth, as softly rounded as a woman's. But he lowered his eyes and hurried into the water, where he stretched out with a sigh.

Outside, people were walking or running, bells were constantly ringing, and women's names being called from one end of the corridor to the other. But the dominant notes were the sound of running water, the smell of soap and of eau de Cologne, the moisture from the baths.

It was like a sweating-room. The mirrors became entirely blurred within a minute. Sometimes a jet of steam from some unknown source made the atmosphere opaque, and one was groping in a cloud. The place reminded one of a laundry. It had the same cheerful vulgarity about it.

And yet, beneath all these noises, this tumult, ran a subtle, shamefaced, stifled undercurrent of whispers, sighs, strange, too damp kisses.

Standing up in the bath, Mr. Hire was soaping himself all over, when the door was thrust open. A woman came in, saying abruptly: 'Oh, it's you? How are you . . .'

And at once, almost before the door had closed behind her, she took off her wrap, and stood naked, more naked in this bathroom atmosphere than she could have been anywhere else.

She was plump, pink, washed and scrubbed like everything else, permeated with steam, soap and scent. She was a picture of health and strength. She pushed the handle of the shower, and Mr. Hire saw the soapy water trickling all down his body, covering the surface of the bath with grey froth. 'Come along.'

She held out an unfolded bath-wrap. She rubbed him down. Her breasts jumped at every movement, and touched his shoulder-blades. 'Been fighting?'

She was referring to the sticking-plaster, as she went on rubbing, and then wiped her own chest, which had got wet. 'I did it shaving . . .' he said humbly.

He was crimson, because of the rubbing and the heat. His legs were trembling from it, and now she was lying flat on her back on the settee with her knees drawn up. 'Come along.'

He was about to obey, but his courage seemed to fail him, and he sat down on the edge of the settee. 'Not that. . .'

'As you like.'

She sat up and settled beside him, and first ran her hands over his chest muscles, which were well padded. As she did this she stared straight ahead of her, and inquired: 'You'll leave me the eau de Cologne?'

He stuttered a feeble 'Yes', drooping his head and letting it slide over the woman's breast. He shut his eyes. In the corners of his mouth, right at the tips, there lurked the ghost of a smile and a hint of suffering.

'Like that?'

She wriggled a little because he was crushing her breast, and Mr. Hire's head followed her movement, like the head of a baby. After a time the woman got up, while he straightened himself with difficulty, shading his eyes.

'Hurry up and get dressed.'

She rolled up her wrap, twisted it round her hips like a loincloth, and went out in that guise, the pink nipples projecting aggressively from her naked breasts. Mr. Hire slowly put on his pants and trousers. Already there came a knock on the door.

'Can I begin?'

It was the servant girl with her dusters, a bucket and a brush. While he was dressing she washed the bath, wiped the tiles and changed the sheet on the cane-seated sofa.

'Enjoyed yourself?'

He made no reply, pulled out some small coins, and with his briefcase under his arm, went out by the way he had come, passing a Negro who was following another attendant.

Out in the street he felt cold, unhealthily cold, because of the dampness that had penetrated his whole body. Shadows were still prowling along by the fence; maybe men hesitating to go in, maybe police from the vice squad?

In the last street before the lights, scarcely fifty yards from the shops, a couple were leaning against a door, so closely entwined, with the milk-white patch of their indistinguishable faces, that one could almost taste the kiss they were exchanging. The girl wore a white overall. She must have come from a butcher's shop or a dairy.

It was eight o'clock. Mr. Hire arrived once more at the Porte d'Italie and was on the point of making for the waiting tram. An accordéon was playing in a bar. Three lads with red paper flowers in their buttonholes jostled him.

He walked to a restaurant and had dinner, at a table by himself, choosing sweet and sugary dishes. All the same, he ate hardly anything. At half-past nine he was outside again, and, down a side street, he stopped in front of a small hotel.

He was still pondering, and all this thought had given him an uneasy expression, and a tendency to jump in alarm when anyone suddenly went by, when a car hooted, or a girl brushed past him.

He returned to the Avenue d'Italie. Most of the shops were shut, but there was as much light as ever, and right at the far end, in the Place, the lamps of a roundabout could be seen revolving against a background of sky.

Once, as a passer-by knocked into him, Mr. Hire dropped his briefcase and had to stoop down and pick it up. He straightened himself again with a sigh of weariness and thereupon made for the tram; saw that his usual seat was occupied, and remained standing on the platform.

He got off at the Villejuif terminus at a quarter-past ten. The crossroads was deserted. There was nobody to be seen except in the two cafés, and the cars ran by along the shiny surface without stopping.

The door of the house was shut. He rang. The concierge worked the release for the door and turned on the light. He went past the lodge without exactly looking in, but for all that he noticed there was a man in there, perhaps two, sitting astride a chair near the stove. He knew it was the man who had torn off the sticking-plaster and who had followed him that morning.

He went heavily upstairs, and the light went out, leaving him with one flight still to climb. But he was used to that. He found the lock, slipped his key into it, and the cold breath of his room blew into his face. When, after shutting the door, he switched on the light, he was frowning, with an air of anxiety. His eyes wandered round the room, searching for something.

Mr. Hire did not smoke, and yet the room was smelling vaguely of stale tobacco.

He went straight to a drawer containing dirty linen, and wearily closed it, flung his leather briefcase onto the bed and hung his hat on the coatstand.

The bloodstained dishcloth had disappeared.

He had put the light out and was standing at the window, in his overcoat, with his hands in his pockets. The girl from the dairy had gone to bed before he got home, but she was not asleep, She was reading another novel, her bare arms lying outside the sheets, a cigarette between her lips.

There was not a sound in the house now, except that of a coffee-mill grinding, just above Mr. Hire's head. Probably somebody ill, for coffee to be prepared at such an hour.

The girl had not let her hair down before getting into bed. It even looked as though she had powdered her face and put on a touch of rouge. Sometimes she raised her head. Her eyes left the printed page glanced across the bed, and looked at the window, with its transparent muslin curtains.

What was she looking at? The dark wall on the far side of the courtyard? She moved her head slightly, as though discreetly beckoning to someone. But wasn't it only because her neck was stiff?

Mr. Hire stood motionless. He could clearly see the girl's full lips parting in a smile. But for whom? Why? She pushed back the sheets a little and stretched herself, so that her white nightdress drew tighter across the curve of her breasts. And she went on smiling, with an air of utter sensual bliss.

Perhaps it was because she was warm in bed? Perhaps her smile was meant for the hero of her book.

She pulled her knees up under the blankets, and Mr. Hire pressed his forehead harder against the cold window-pane. She was summoning him! There could be no doubt about it! She was moving her head again, as before! She was smiling straight at his window! He did not move, and she got out of bed, uncovered her pink thighs for a moment. When she stood up, with the lamp behind her, he could see the outline of her body through the transparent nightdress.

She was making signs to him to come! She was pointing to her door! She drew back the bolt and got back into bed with a voluptuous, enticing movement, stretched out again, this time holding her breasts with both hands.

Mr. Hire drew back. He could still see her, but from further away. He knocked into the table, fumbled in a drawer, without switching the light on, to find something white, no matter what, and came upon a handkerchief.

The girl was no longer watching the window. She doubtless supposed he was on his way down, and she was tidying her hair with the help of a pocket mirror, rubbing lipstick over her mouth.

Mr. Hire made no noise. Above his head a wire mattress creaked and a voice murmured plaintively. He propped the handkerchief against the window with a broomstick, at the spot where his face had been before, and he went to open the door, listened.

In spite of his felt slippers, some of the stairs creaked. A voice from inside one door called out:

'Is that you?'

He went by without answering. That flat belonged to a couple with three children. The concierge's lodge was in darkness, and Mr. Hire went past the door, nearly sent the dustbins clattering, and reached the courtyard.

It was nine feet long, six feet wide, and from top to bottom there were windows, only three of which were lit up, including one right at the top, where the coffee was being made. His own window was the one just below that. He saw it in perspective, quite dark. Against this dark background he sought for the white patch of the handkerchief, found it, ghostly but visible, as his face too, every night was visible.

Facing him was a door, that of B staircase, which led up to the girl's room. Mr. Hire stared at it, hesitating, and fled back to his own staircase, breathing hard.

There had been time for a change to take place in the ground-floor passage. It was lit up. Someone had pressed the button. Yet the doorbell had not rung. No footsteps had been heard.

Mr. Hire walked on tiptoe, his body leaning forward. He had reached the glass-panelled door of the lodge, when he stopped short.

In the shadows on the other side of the pane, a man was standing, watching him placidly, smoking a pipe. His face did not bear a tragic, nor threatening nor ironical expression. No expression at all! He was smoking his pipe as though it were perfectly natural to be smoking at this hour, standing in the concierge's lodge, in complete darkness except for the glow of the lamps in the passage.

He showed no surprise at sight of Mr. Hire, who was staring at him with round eyes. He moved. He raised his hand, took the pipe from his mouth, and puffed out a cloud of smoke which, hovering against the glass pane, hid his face for a moment as though it had been rubbed out.

Mr. Hire stretched his hand towards the door-handle, let it fall again, and, tearing himself from the spot, made rapidly for the stairs and went up, holding closely to the banisters.

Back in his room, he sat down, but he could see the window opposite, the girl bolting her door again, letting down her hair with a furious gesture, crushing out her cigarette on the enamel surface of her washbasin.

Finally, turning towards the courtyard, towards his window, she put out her tongue and switched off the light.

IV

IT was from the wireless, at five minutes to eight, that Mr. Hire discovered this was Sunday, for every Sunday morning it played, talked and whistled in some unlocated corner of the house. Looking out of his window he saw that the girl's room had not been tidied, and this, too, was a feature of Sundays. At one o'clock the girl would come rushing in, pull up the sheets and blankets just anyhow, and change her dress with frantic speed.

There was still no wood in his room. The water in the jug was covered with a thin layer of ice, and Mr. Hire, collarless and in bedroom slippers, set off down the staircase.

Out of doors it seemed colder than the previous day, but that might be because there were not so many people about. The wide road was almost empty. One could see from the attitude of the tram that it had no intention of leaving for at least a quarter of an hour. The people walking along in the pale, sharp air, were mostly dressed in mourning, bending forwards, with flowers in their hands, on their way to the new cemetery. This was their time of day.

As he went past the concierge's lodge, Mr. Hire saw only the little girl, dressed in her white knickers, washing herself. But from the front door he noticed the inspector, at the cross-roads, stamping his feet as he chatted with the policeman on point duty. The inspector saw him too, made no move, and Mr. Hire turned left, into the grocer's shop.

Though he was only wearing his overcoat, with upturned collar, over his nightshirt, he still looked over-dressed for the time of day, almost ceremonious. He waited patiently, with dignity, for his turn, then pointed to the things he wanted.

'A dozen . . . Half a pound . . . How much is that?'

The people in the place had known him for a long time, and yet they looked at him with embarrassment and curiosity. He wanted kindling for his fire, cheese, butter and cooked vegetables. At the delicatessen shop he bought a cold cutlet and some pickled gherkins. His arms were full of little white packages and he had to stick out his stomach to hold them up.

In the middle of the cross-roads the inspector, standing beside the uniformed policeman, watched his comings and goings in the way a schoolmaster, in the playground, might keep an eye on his charges while chatting with the headmaster.

Not more than a couple of hundred yards away, a group of people had collected in front of a hoarding from which glared a red and yellow poster advertising polish. This was in the street across the way, a street that began with houses, like any other, but trailed off, after a short distance, into building-lots and patches of waste ground.

If you went down there after dark, some woman would invariably touch you on the arm and point to the empty building-lots, those where, two Sundays ago, the mutilated body of one such woman had been found.

Even now, people were still taking advantage of Sunday to come and stare at the exact spot and the brown stains that remained on a block of stone.

Loaded with his parcels, Mr. Hire went past the dairy just as the assistant was coming out with bottles of milk. She stopped in the doorway and smiled, while he rushed into the porch, where he bumped against the concierge, who was standing with her back to him and who turned round with a terrified start.

He went on faster and faster, stumbled over the bottom step of the stairs and one of the little parcels fell, he did not know which. He did not stop to pick it up, but merely clutched the other packets more closely, and by the time he arrived, breathless, on the fourth floor, he was almost running.

He did not stop even then, did not look at his reflection in the mirror. Kneeling down, he began by lighting the stove, which at once gave out a lively purring sound. Then he took off his overcoat, tied a towel round his waist by way of an apron, and set about cleaning the room.

The house was full of noises, many more men's voices than on weekdays, and the murmur of running water, the yells of children who were being thrashed. The wireless babbled ceaselessly, perhaps in the fifth- floor room

where a workman lived, or perhaps on the third floor; the sound was so evenly diffused that one couldn't tell.

At half-past ten Mr. Hire looked round the room, now clean, the bed made, the stove burning and black-leaded, the gas-ring with the kettle singing.

He shaved and dressed, except for his collar and tie, which he would not put on till the last moment.

And that was all. Now he could just sit down and think. From time to time he glanced at the window opposite, through which he could vaguely make out a basinful of soapy water. When he opened his newspaper he knew at once how the girl would be spending the afternoon, for there was a big football match. At half-past one she would be waiting at the second stopping-place of the special Sunday bus, and a little later her boy-friend would turn up.

If there had been no interesting match, they would have gone to Paris, to the *Splendid Cinema.* It was always the one or the other.

An ambulance went by, its bell ringing all the time. That happened every Sunday. At the same moment the little boy's violin joined in with the wireless.

Mr. Hire wound his alarm-clock, re-polished his shoes, which he had already cleaned, arranged his provisions on the table and sat down to lunch. That whiled away a good hour. He would fill his mouth with food and chew for a long time, gazing at the window opposite him, his thoughts so far away that five minutes went by before he remembered to take another mouthful. He made himself some coffee, and the baby overhead had an interminable fit of despair, howling away until silenced, probably, by its mother's breast.

It was only twelve o'clock. And by a quarter-past twelve the table had been cleared, the oilcloth sponged with fresh water, the remains of the food put away in the cupboard.

The girl from the dairy came up to her room at one o'clock, but by daylight she could only be dimly seen as she flung her workday shoes, her overall and her skirt across the room, and stood in front of the looking-glass in her vest and panties.

Mr. Hire did not go over to the window. He watched from a distance, while putting on his tie and his button-shoes. He knew that when she was ready he would hear a crash, as she opened the window to air the room.

Anyway, he did not wait. He went out and passed the lodge at such a speed that the concierge had to dash into the passage to make sure it was he. On the pavement, some people were still on their way to the cemetery: this was the outgoing tide, arriving from Paris and moving towards the open.

But the incoming tide was stronger, as the inhabitants of Juvisy, Corbeil and still more distant places, flowed towards Paris in vans, in special buses, on bicycles, on foot.

The inspector was there, not ten yards away from the house, and Mr. Hire walked right past him, waddling, bouncing with his chest pushed forward, in his usual gait. He didn't walk like that on purpose. It was the way he was built. His plump body skipped of its own accord as his short legs twinkled along.

The crowd waiting between the chains at the tram-stop was a hundred yards long, and Mr. Hire crossed the road, stopped twice because of cars, and got himself pushed forward by the policeman.

'Come along . . . Hurry up, there . . .'

He was breathing with difficulty. His nerves were tense. He deliberately refrained from stepping onto the pavement on this side. He was listening to the different noises, and could sense that the plain-clothes inspector was about thirty feet away.

At last there came the roar of an engine, and a bell jangling frantically; this was the special bus from Juvisy, which was full and not going to stop.

Mr. Hire's teeth were clenched. He half-turned his head, saw the front part of the bus, and flung himself forward with all his strength, groping with his right hand, which at last caught the rail of the bus, while two arms were stretched to haul him onto the step.

He couldn't stop himself smiling, in a kind of excitement that made him seem touching and absurd. The conductor, at the far end of the bus, had not seen him. The people on the platform, already close-packed, squeezed together more tightly, but looked at him with silent disapproval. As for the inspector, he was left far behind at the crossroads, standing on his two useless legs, almost lost in the crowd.

A woman with somebody's elbow jammed into her ribs grumbled, and Mr. Hire stammered hastily:

'I'm getting off at once . . .'

The bus ran past another stop, and Mr. Hire edged onto the step, faced forwards, and let go. From the platform a dozen faces watched him

curiously, as, alone on the road and drawn along by the impetus of the bus, he trotted behind it for a dozen short steps.

It was a quarter-past one. He walked quickly, not along the main street of Villejuif, but along a parallel street which led back towards the cross-roads, though he did not venture as far as that.

He stopped at a street corner, flattening himself against the wall, as grave and forbidding as a policeman on the watch.

The dairy girl came along first, the collar of her tight-fitting green coat turned up, her cheeks chapped with the cold. Almost at once she was joined by a young man in a grey felt hat, and she stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, as she took his arm.

They were talking, but their words could not be heard. The Colombes bus pulled up, and Mr. Hire noticed that the girl glanced round before getting in, as though she were looking for someone.

Then he, too, got in. There was not a scrap of room left, but nobody was turned away. One couldn't move an arm or a leg. The passengers' heads were swaying, at more or less the same level, to the jolting of the bus, and inside they formed an indistinguishable mass.

The couple stood about two yards away from Mr. Hire. Now and then their eyes met, as the eyes of all the passengers did, expressionless, blank, indifferent. The bus bounced over the cobbles and through the Porte d'Italie, where more people got on.

The boy friend was thin and sickly. His expression, when he caught Mr. Hire's eye, was always ironical, but he was always the first to look away, because Mr. Hire had a capacity for staring at people for a very long time, without intention, curiosity or any other feeling, simply as though staring at a wall or at the sky.

Then the young man would jog the girl with his elbow, whisper in her ear and pretend to laugh, and Mr. Hire would blush a little.

But this didn't often happen. There were too many heads separating them. The conductor elbowed his way through the crowd, demanding the exact fare.

They went through empty streets and squares, with only a few passers-by to be seen on the pavements, white with frost, where dust swirled along on the north wind.

And, suddenly, here was the crowd, with shouts and sounds of music, a violent pushing and shoving which carried Mr. Hire along and thrust him

out of the bus. He just managed to slow down and look around, to make sure the couple were among the mob.

There were anything from ten to twenty ticket-offices. In the thick of the crowd, tickets of various colours were held out to him by men who shouted in his ear:

'Reserved stands . . . Twenty-five francs . . .'

A look of childish distress came over his face when he lost the couple, and he spun round and round like a top, gaped for joy on catching sight of the girl's green hat in the distance. 'Sorry . . . Sorry . . '

He reached the ticket-office almost at the same time as she did, and took a ten-franc seat. She bought two oranges, which her companion paid for with a disdainful air. People were going about in all directions, calling out different things, while from the far side of the hoardings came the sound of stamping, impatient feet in the stands.

A ray of sun was shining, sour yellow like the oranges, but once through the gates, the wind, blowing across the frozen ground, lifted people's hats and tightened the skin on their faces.

The young man had his hands in his pockets, his overcoat unbuttoned. And the girl was clinging to his arm like a child afraid of getting lost. One behind the other, they edged their way between the packed rows of benches, followed by Mr. Hire in his bowler hat and velvet-collared black coat.

'Sorry . . . Sorry . . .'

Most of the spectators were men in caps, and nearly all of them were eating something, peanuts, oranges, or roasted chestnuts. They hailed one another from afar. Mr. Hire made his way through all this, with his apologetic, smiling manner:

'Sorry . . .'

He found a seat in the row right behind the couple, and as there were no backs to the seats, his knees were pressed against the girl's spine.

The spectators were all rhythmically stamping their feet, while a band struggled vainly against the north wind, which carried the music the other way from the stands.

At last, on the vast ground, some tiny figures ran out, one group striped in yellow and blue, the other dressed in red and green. They stood palavering in the very middle, then a whistle was blown and the crowd yelled in chorus.

Mr. Hire drew in his shoulders, to leave a smaller surface for the cold, and he was particularly careful not to move his knees a fraction of an inch, for the girl was leaning on them, pressing hard as though against a chair-back, while her kid-gloved hand still clung to her companion's arm.

The striped mannikins were chasing about the field, halted now and then by the whistle, and Mr. Hire was watching the expressive back of a neck, covered with light golden fluff, fifteen inches away from his nose. The girl never looked round, but she must have felt his eyes fixed on her, for sometimes, after the whistle had sounded, she seemed impelled to ask, by way of diversion:

'What was that for?'

She was watching the game without understanding it. Her companion shrugged his shoulders. The stands vibrated like drums, they shook, they even swayed, when thousands of people rose like one man and yelled.

Mr. Hire kept his seat. At half-time he looked round, as though awakened with a start, at the crowd which, suddenly reduced to a quiet rippling mass, had begun chewing again. The girl was eating, too, an ice-cold orange, of which she tore the peel away with her nails. The juice spurted out, bitterly sharp. Her little pointed teeth nibbled at the pulp, her stiffened tongue pushed its way in, her lips sucked at it, and the smell of the fruit spread around for yards.

'It's sour…' the dairy-maid remarked with satisfaction. 'Give me a cigarette now.'

She smoked with her lips puckered into an O round the cigarette, as people do who smoke for the pleasure of the performance and not for the taste of the tobacco. The two smells mingled. They were sour and stale together, seeming to emanate from the back of her auburn- fluffed neck which was as straight and round as a pillar.

'Who's winning?'

The young man went on reading a sporting paper, ignoring the little hand that still lay on his wrist. Half-time came to an end. The players swarmed over the ground again. The blasts of the whistle variously stopped or started the scrimmage again.

It was almost dark by the end, and the spectators were stamping their feet to warm themselves. A few snowflakes were floating in the grey air, and one of them, drifting in under the roof of the stand, fell on the green hat and melted there.

Getting out was a struggle, and Mr. Hire would probably have lost the couple, if the young man had not met some friends.

They had gathered in a bunch near one of the gates, and nobody was taking any notice of the girl, who was standing a little apart.

She saw Mr. Hire come out, and gave him a long look, her eyes unusually serious. The young men were talking loudly. Her boy friend turned to her, made some brief remark, took a five-franc note out of his pocket and, giving it to her, kissed her on the forehead.

The men packed themselves into a taxi, which made off towards Paris. As for her, she walked slowly away, as though bewildered at finding herself alone. Mr. Hire stood still, to give her a start. She did not go towards the tram, nor towards the bus-stop. She went in the same direction as the taxi, without haste and without a backward glance. She knew Mr. Hire was there. She could hear his footsteps, recognizable because of their jerkiness, and because the very thin soles of his boots touched the ground so lightly.

It was dark now. The shutters of the shops were closed. Only the cafés were lit, and families in their Sunday best were going home, the children walking in front.

Ten yards separated Mr. Hire from the girl. Then it was only five. Then he made three rapid strides, but stopped to let her get ahead again.

They went on like this for a quarter of an hour, and from time to time she half-turned her head, not enough to see him clearly, but enough to make sure he was still there.

At last she went into a little bar, where there was only a clear space of three feet along the horseshoe-shaped counter. 'A *diabolo.'*

Elbows propped on the zinc bar-top, she gazed at Mr. Hire, who had taken his stand on the opposite side of the curve and now muttered, shamefaced: 'A *diabolo.'*

Two men at the far end stared at them, and even broke off their conversation, till the proprietor joined them to resume an interrupted game of dice.

The girl was bringing coins out of her handbag. Her cheeks were glowing, her eyes very bright, from the fresh air, and her parted lips looked as though they were bleeding.

'How much?'

Disappointed, she was avoiding Mr. Hire's eye.

'Seventy centimes.'

And Mr. Hire laid a one-franc piece on the bar, without waiting for his change, went out at the same moment as the girl, stood back to let her pass first through the door.

She thought he was going to speak to her. She smiled, her hand ready to take his, her lips to murmur:

'Good evening . . .'

But he said nothing, and she went on along the pavement, with a more pronounced swaying of her plump hips, over which her skirt stretched tight at every step.

As they drew closer to Paris, there were more lights and more people. The girl went on and on, a little tired, but at an obstinate steady pace. Coming to a square, she got into a tram without even turning round to see if she were still being followed. Perhaps she didn't care now?

Mr. Hire sat down three places away from her. The tram went along some crowded main streets, with numerous cafés, little booths where oddments were on sale, and couples with arms round each other's waists. Mr. Hire was pale, probably from fatigue. His complexion had turned leaden, as it sometimes did, with dark circles round his eyes, and he seemed to have been deflated. He looked less childish, less plump, less odd. His eyes were no longer expressionless, and, like a dog's eyes, which they resembled in colour, they seemed to be appealing for help.

The girl was sitting opposite him. She was playing her part. She was pretending not to see him, to be at her ease, indifferent. Twice, she touched up her powder and rouge. Twice, too, she tugged at her skirt, as though she had caught Mr. Hire staring at her knees.

The scenery was growing familiar. Without even looking at the windows one recognized the neon lights of the Place d'Italie, then the cafés of the Avenue, then the Porte.

'Terminus! All change.'

She got out first and paused for a second on the edge of the pavement.

Twenty yards further on, other trams were waiting to start for Villejuif. The road was dark all the way, and passers-by few and far between.

However, she started off. She had first bought a franc's worth of chestnuts, and she ate them as she went along, slowing down when she had difficulty in shelling one of them. She had walked five hundred yards when she jumped, as though missing something. She turned round and found no one behind her.

Mr. Hire was no longer there. A tram went by on the other side of the road, and there he was, sitting in the reddish light next to one of its windows.

To reach the next stop, she had another five hundred yards to walk. When she got there, there was no tram in sight; she went on to the next stop and thus, by gradual stages, she reached Villejuif on foot. She bought some more chestnuts at the crossroads. She was tired. Her heels were rubbed sore, and the soles of her feet were hurting, because her shoes were so highly arched. In spite of the temperature she was so hot that she had pushed her green hat to the back of her head, and it was like this that she went into the house, her bag of chestnuts in her hand.

Out of habit, she glanced into the lodge. She saw the concierge, who had put her spectacles on and was reading the newspaper, her elbows on the table. Opposite her, the inspector was warming his hands above the stove. She went in. 'Don't get up! Have a chestnut? . . .'

She blew as she spoke, because the chestnut in her mouth was hot. The inspector took two. He, too, was obviously tired and discouraged. 'You don't know where Mr. Hire can have got to, I suppose?'

'Me? How should I know?'

'She goes out every Sunday afternoon with her young man,' explained the concierge without looking up from her paper. 'Was it a good match?'

The inspector gazed at the stove with annoyance.

'He did it on purpose!'

'What?'

'Jumped on a moving bus. I was expecting him to take the tram, as usual. So he must have been going somewhere he didn't want to be followed.'

'Does it interest you very much?'

'I'll say it does!'

'I might go and have a word with him.'

The concierge looked up. The spectacles altered her appearance, made her look older, but rather distinguished. 'Are you crazy?'

The girl flung her head back and laughed. You could see scraps of chestnut in her mouth.

'What d'you bet I make him come clean?' she called, as she opened the door.

And she ran to staircase B, went into her own room, saw Mr. Hire's lit-up window, and Mr. Hire himself, pouring boiling water into his little coffee-

pot. She had not turned on her light. She groped her way across to her dressing-table, found the bottle of eau de Cologne, and sprinkled some on her dress and hair. Still in darkness, she combed her hair and pulled up her artificial silk stockings, which were rolled over elastic bands above her knees.

Mr. Hire was laying his table: a cup, a plate, a saucer for butter, a slice of bread, and some ham.

About to leave her room, the girl hesitated again, looked at her bed, then at the lighted window. She had no need to go past the lodge. In the courtyard she was surprised by the cold, for all this coming and going had made her sweat. The staircase was the same as her own, except that the doors were painted brown, whereas those of staircase B were dark blue.

She had to stop, because a whole family was toiling up, the children in front, the mother, loaded with parcels, panting in the rear.

At last she reached the door corresponding to her own. She gave a final pat to her copper-coloured hair, a final tug to a wrinkled stocking, and knocked.

There was the sound of a cup being put down on its saucer, a chair violently pushed back. The girl smiled as she heard shuffled footsteps approaching the door. She looked down. For another second the outline of the keyhole was lit up, then something came between the door and the light behind it.

She guessed this was an eye, and smiled, drew back a step to put herself in the field of vision, and thrust forward her full bosom with a confident gesture.

V

MR. HIRE did not move. The girl could still see the eye at the keyhole, and she forced another smile and muttered, after making sure there was nobody on the stairs:

'It's me . . .'

The eye vanished, the keyhole was darkened, no doubt by the man's body as he straightened up, but there was not a sound, not a movement. The girl tapped her foot with impatience and, as the light lit up once more, bent down to it in her turn.

Mr. Hire had already withdrawn to a distance of three yards, with his back against the table, staring at the door. He had the anguished expression of a sick man awaiting a crisis and holding his breath. Could he, too, see an eye at the keyhole?

The dairy-maid was forced to go away, because someone was coming downstairs. By the time she reached the lodge she had managed to put on a smile, but her full lips betrayed disappointment all the same.

'That you, Alice?'

The concierge had her back turned, busy undressing her little daughter. The inspector, sitting beside the stove with a coffee-mill between his knees, looked inquiringly at the dairy-maid.

'Did you see him?'

She perched on the edge of the table and shrugged her shoulders, and her thighs could be vaguely glimpsed above the rolled stocking- tops.

'I bet he's mad,' she said.

And the concierge, without turning round, with a safety-pin between her teeth, said:

'A madman who knows what he's about! . . . Run along to bed, now,' she added, pushing her daughter towards the back of the lodge.

She was tired. She took the coffee-mill from the inspector.

'Thank you. That's very kind of you.'

They had grown accustomed to each other. During the fortnight the police officer had spent in watching the district, he had adopted this place as his refuge. There was always hot coffee waiting on a corner of the stove. And he sometimes brought along a bottle of wine or some cakes.

Alice swung a muscular leg and stared sulkily at the floor.

'Has my boss got back?'

'An hour ago, with her sister-in-law from Conflans.'

And the concierge, sitting down, took up the conversation at the point where she and the inspector had broken off. She put her glasses on again, and her face took on a reflective expression.

'I could swear it, you know, but I wouldn't like to say I might not be mistaken . . . That Saturday, he came home at the usual time. It's only on the first Monday of each month that he gets back late. I didn't see him go out again, and yet during the night I pulled the *cordon* for him.'

'To let him out?'

'No, to let him in—that's just the point!'

All this thinking was sharpening her. Alice went on swinging her leg, the inspector's eyes following it automatically. It was hot. The coffee was dripping through the filter, drop by drop. It was all typical of Sunday evening, the weariness that does not come from work, the relaxed, sluggish atmosphere, and the minutes creeping past more slowly than on other days.

The girl's back ached, her feet painful in their too tight shoes. Tenants kept passing the lodge and starting lazily up the stairs. A woman opened the door.

'Didn't my mother-in-law come?'

'At three o'clock. She said she'd find you at the cemetery.'

Alice, an unlighted cigarette between her lips, was watching the inspector, and suddenly asked:

'Aren't you going to arrest him?'

The concierge turned her little eyes on the dairy-maid.

'You're a nasty girl,' she declared.

And she wasn't joking. She disapproved of the girl's luscious figure, her bare arms and dimpled chin.

'We don't know yet,' sighed the policeman, offering a match. 'We need some proof.'

The concierge's brow wrinkled as though this statement was meant for her alone, as though it were for her to unearth the desired proof.

'If he's left free, he'll do it again. One can feel it. I couldn't touch him for all the money in the world. Why, I daren't even touch his laundry when he brings it down on Wednesdays for me to give to the washerwoman.'

The inspector threw his cigarette into the coal-scuttle. He, too, was tired, tired of doing nothing, of waiting, of dividing his time between this kitchen and the Villejuif cross-roads.

'Well, take this up to him,' he said to the concierge, producing an envelope from his pocket.

'What is it?'

'A summons from the superintendent, for Wednesday. Perhaps that'll make him try something or other.'

'Must I go up?'

She was scared and yet, once the letter was in her hand, she became menacing.

'All right!'

The dairy-maid slid down from the table and made for the door. The inspector stared hard at her, pointed to the departing concierge, even put forward a tentative hand. He would have liked to be alone with her, but she pretended not to understand and went hurriedly across the courtyard, since it was freezing harder than ever and the square of sky above was silver-grey, though night had long fallen.

In the darkness of her room, kneeling on the bed to see more clearly, Alice did not hear the concierge knocking on the door of the room opposite, but she could guess when it happened from the start Mr. Hire gave. He had been busy with a pair of scissors, cutting out big squares of brown paper which lay on the table. He had taken off his collar and his socks.

Still holding the scissors, he turned towards the door and fell back a step. Then he hurried across on tiptoe and put his eye to the keyhole.

Outside on the landing, the concierge must have been growing impatient and made some remark. For Mr. Hire stood up, buttoned his jacket, and opened the door, just a very few inches, putting his hand out in such a way that he himself could not be seen. The sound of the third-floor violin came through, and that of the wireless which someone had switched on when they got home. '

His door closed again, Mr. Hire looked at the envelope, turned it in all directions without opening it; then he fetched a knife from the cupboard where the gas-ring was, and slowly slit it open, unfolded the sheet of paper.

He made no gesture. His expression did not change. He simply sat down by the table, his eyes fixed on the brown paper he had previously been cutting up. He was not hearing the cars on the road, or the violin or the wireless. He was existing in a blur of sound, a humming that might have come from the stove or from his own pulse.

Alice had left her room on tiptoe. But suddenly Mr. Hire raised his head and stared across the courtyard at the girl's room, where the light was turned on at that moment. He had never noticed its details so clearly. The girl came in, banged the door behind her and, without the slightest pause, flung herself fully dressed on the bed, her face in the crook of her elbow.

Mr. Hire still did not budge. She was lying flat on her stomach. Her whole body was shaking so that her rump jerked erotically. But the

convulsive shaking of her shoulders was the most evident of all, while her feet beat furiously on the pink eiderdown.

She was weeping. She was sobbing. Mr. Hire, embarrassed as though by something abnormal, picked up one of the pieces of brown paper from the table and fastened it, with four drawing-pins, over one of the three window-panes. But he could still see her through the two others. He worked slowly. His lips parted as though he were talking to himself.

Alice pulled herself together, twisted round like a leaping trout, bounded to her feet and, in a fury, pulled open her green silk blouse, uncovering her white vest with the breasts bulging under it.

Her hair was tousled. She began to walk about. She went from the bed to the dressing table, grabbed a comb, which she then hurled across the room, and twice she looked in Mr. Hire's direction.

He had picked up the second piece of brown paper and four more drawing-pins. Two of these were already in place. Alice hunted feverishly in her bag, afraid to lose a second, brought out a pencil, tore off a big piece of lace-edged paper from a shelf.

Mr. Hire retreated to the table, whence he could see nothing. But he was no sooner there than he came forward a step and bent his head to look through the third window-pane, the only one still uncovered.

She had already finished writing and, kneeling on her bed, was holding the paper close up to her own window, watching the room opposite with an anxious face.

She could see him trying to hide. She snapped her fingers like an impatient schoolboy.

It never entered her head that Mr. Hire could not read what she had written, because the light was behind the piece of paper and all he saw was a dark square.

Becoming more and more irritable, she gave several little taps on the glass, and he came another step forward, mistrustful, then stood motionless for quite a time. At last he made a negative gesture with his hand, took his piece of brown paper, stepped back, and held it up close to his own lamp.

She did not understand. She pointed to her own sheet of paper, and Mr. Hire indicated his lamp with a brief and still hesitant little gesture. As she was wiping her eyes with her free hand, he went close up to the window, held his paper as she was holding hers, then withdrew and raised it up to the lamp.

She had understood. She jumped off her bed and held out her paper with both hands.

After all this, Mr. Hire had beads of sweat on his forehead and more still on his upper lip, under the moustache. He puckered his heavy dark eyebrows and read: 'I absolutely must speak to you.'

She was still holding the paper high in the air, and this drew up her breasts, making them look still heavier, and revealed the reddish hair under her armpits.

As Mr. Hire drew back, she rushed forward again, pleading, nodding repeatedly as much as to say:

'Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . .'

He had practically disappeared, for when he was at the far side of his room she could not see him any longer. He came back, then retreated again with a stern expression, pointing with one finger across to her room.

'No . . .' she shook her head.

And she pointed to Mr. Hire's room, and did not wait for a reply. Springing off the bed, she snatched up her blouse and wriggled into it as she made for the door. She came back, however, to look at herself in the glass, and after dabbing her face with a towel, she powdered it a little, pushed out her lips to make sure the lipstick had not smudged.

Mr. Hire, stiff with fright, pinned up the third sheet of paper with two drawing-pins, ran to his washstand, emptied the basin, shut the cupboard, rushed across the bed and smoothed the counterpane. There was still no sound on the stairs. He paused in front of his looking-glass, ran the comb through his hair, fingered his cut and straightened his moustache. He was about to put on his collar and tie when footsteps came to a halt on the landing.

He was breathing so hard that the wiry hairs of his moustache were visibly shivering. His eyes were blank. He had found it immeasurably difficult to say:

'Come in!'

And he could sniff close at hand the same smell that had been carried to him faintly on the north wind as he sat in the stand at Bois-Colombes.

It was a warm smell, in which he could distinguish the sickly sweetness of face-powder, the sharper note of some scent or other, but most of all the

girl's own smell, the smell of her flesh, her hair, her sweat.

She, too, was breathing hard. She sniffed, glanced round the room, and finally discovered Mr. Hire, standing just inside the door he had now closed again.

She could no longer think of anything to say. First she tried to smile, even thought of holding out her hand, but it was impossible to stretch out one's hand to a man so motionless, so distant. 'It's hot in here.'

And she looked at the window, now covered by the sheets of brown paper. She walked over to it, lifted up one piece of paper, saw her own room, and more especially her bed, which looked almost near enough to touch. When she turned round again she at last caught Mr. Hire's eye, and she blushed scarlet, while he turned his head away.

A little earlier she had been pretending to cry, but now her eyelids were really pricking, her pupils misted over. He did nothing to help her, left her to fight it back alone in the emptiness of the room, where the slightest noise seemed to echo more loudly than anywhere else. He even went across to the stove and bent down to pick up the poker.

It was no use waiting any longer. Alice began to cry and, as the bed was close at hand, she first sat down on it, then slid down sideways and propped herself on the pillow.

'I'm so ashamed!' she stammered. 'If you only knew!' Bending forward, still grasping the poker, he looked at her, and the last traces of colour faded from his cheeks. She was still crying. Her face was hidden. She murmured between her sobs:

'You saw, didn't you? It's horrible! I didn't know. I was fast asleep.' Peeping between her fingers, she saw him put down the poker and straighten up, still hesitant. She was wet with perspiration. Sweat was soaking the silk of her blouse, under the arms.

'Everything can be seen from here! And there have I been every day, undressing and . . .'

She sobbed harder than ever, giving him a glimpse of her tear-stained face, her mouth distorted in the effort to bring out the words.

'I wouldn't care! I don't mind you looking at me. But it's that dreadful thing . . .'

Slowly, so slowly that the change was imperceptible, Mr. Hire's waxen features were beginning to come alive, his expression becoming human, anxious, pitiful. 'Do come nearer to me! I feel as though that would make it

easier...' But he was standing bolt upright beside the bed, like a tailor's dummy. He couldn't pull his hand away in time. She caught hold of it.

'What can you have thought? You know better than anybody that it was the first time he'd come, don't you?'

She had no handkerchief, and wiped her tears on the counter-pane. Heat radiated from her plump, heavy body, and there it lay sprawling, in the room, on Mr. Hire's bed, a source of exuberant life. Mr. Hire stared up at the ceiling. It seemed to him that the whole house must be able to hear the echoes, feel the palpitations of so much life. Someone was walking to and fro, overhead, with regular, persistent steps, probably carrying the baby, to hush it to sleep.

'Come and sit down by me.'

It was too soon. He still resisted, trying to escape the attraction of the body that lay there, huddling up and stretching out, spasmodically, between the sobs.

Calming down, she said brokenly:

'He was only a friend, someone to go out with on Sundays . . .'

Mr. Hire was well aware of this, since he always followed them, to the football ground or the cycle-track on fine days, to the cinema in the Place d'Italie when it was wet. He used to see them meet at half-past one, always at the same bus-stop. Alice would cling to the young man's arm. Later, after dark, they would stop now and then in a doorway, and their faces formed a single pale patch.

'Now, I hate him!' she exclaimed.

Mr. Hire looked at his wash-stand, at the alarm-clock on the mantelpiece, at the little stove, all the things he handled by himself every day, as though appealing to them for help. He was melting. He could no longer hold back on the slope, and yet he still had a mental reservation, he could still look on at his own behaviour, and he was displeased with the Mr. Hire he was watching.

Alice, too, was peering slyly at him, her eyes suddenly cold and lucid, just for a second.

'You were there, weren't you? Own up!'

The window, with its sheets of brown paper, had a sullen air. The lamp was still burning in the room opposite, but only a faint glow could be seen through the paper.

'I often forget to bolt the door and put out the light before I go to sleep . . .'

Now he was no longer being asked to do so, Mr. Hire sat down on the very edge of the bed, while Alice still held his hand in hers. It was true: she had fallen asleep over her book that Saturday, and it had slipped to the floor. Mr. Hire had not been sleepy. The window-pane was cool against his forehead.

Then the man had come in, not well dressed as he was on Sundays, but wearing a dirty cap, a scarf round his neck instead of a collar. Alice had propped herself on her elbows. He had signed to her to keep quiet and begun to speak to her in a low voice, in short, dry phrases, while he first washed his hands in her basin and then looked himself slowly up and down, as though on the look-out for tell-tale marks.

He was feverish. His movements were jerky. When he came up to the bed he had pulled a woman's handbag from his pocket and pushed it under the mattress. The words he was saying could not be heard. Alice was frightened, but she had not called out or made a single gesture when, with a mocking grin, the man had suddenly twitched back the bedclothes, uncovering her warm, bare legs and thighs.

'It was frightful!' she said. 'And you were watching! You saw the whole thing!'

Yes, the whole thing! A savage attack by a man bent on relieving his nervous tension at all costs.

Mr. Hire stared at the flowers on the wallpaper. The little pink spots had reappeared on his cheeks. Alice felt his hand tremble in hers, and her own clutch had an unhealthy, equivocal languor.

'I thought of that at once,' she added. 'Yes, while it was going on! But I didn't dare move, I didn't dare say anything. I only looked round, and I could see you. He said he'd kill me if I told. He'd kill you, too. That's why I still go out with him.' Her voice was not so pathetic now.

I don't know why he did it. He works in a garage. He earns good money. Friends must have led him on. Now he daren't even touch the two thousand francs, because he's afraid the numbers of the notes may be known.'

Mr. Hire moved, as though to get up, but she held him back. 'Do you believe me when I swear it was the first time, and that I didn't even enjoy it?'

Her hip was pressed against him. She was shivering. Her whole body was shivering, every inch of her was warm and alive, and her face had more colour after the tears, her lips blood-red, her eyes moist. The baby overhead was crying. Someone was tapping a foot rhythmically on the floor-boards, to soothe it. For the first time, Mr. Hire had ceased to hear the hurried ticking of his alarm-clock. 'Do you hate me?'

She was becoming impatient. She was afraid of breaking the spell by some word or gesture.

'Come closer . . . closer . ..'

She drew him towards her. Mr. Hire's elbow weighed on her breast.

'I'm all alone!' she managed to sob.

And he stared at her, from close to, frowning. He could feel her breath on his face. He was almost lying on her, and she was moving all the time, as though trying to force him into physical awareness. 'I know Émile will do what he said!'

She was growing dispirited, finding it hard to conceal her impatience, which was turning to anger. 'Won't you help me?'

She grasped him by the shoulders. This was the only thing left to try. She slipped one arm round his neck and pressed her burning cheek against his.

'Say yes . . . say yes . . .'

She was really shuddering, but from strain. And all at once he whispered in her ear:

'I've been very unhappy!'

He took no advantage of their physical contact, he did not seem to notice her stomach was crushed under him, one of her legs twined round his. He closed his eyes. He was breathing her in.

'Don't move!' he implored.

This gave her a chance to relax, and for an instant her face showed boredom and fatigue. When he half opened his eyes, she murmured, smiling:

'This is a nice room.'

It was harsh, probably because the lamp was unshaded. The lines were sharp. The colours clashed with one another. The oilcloth made the rectangle of the table look as cold and hard as a tombstone. 'Are you always alone?'

He tried to get up, but she held him back, pressed close against him. 'No. Stay here. I'm so comfortable! I feel as though . . .' And suddenly she asked,

saucily: 'Will you let me come and tidy up for you, sometimes?' She meant more than that. She tried hard to set up another bond between them, but he seemed not to understand, and she was afraid of frightening him by making things too clear. 'You will save me, won't you?'

She was changing her attitude according to the inspiration of the moment, and this last phrase, for example, was a pretext for holding up her moist lips to him. He only brushed them with his. He was stroking her hair, while he gazed into space. 'Are you a bachelor? Or a widower?'

'Yes.'

She didn't know whether the 'Yes' applied to bachelor or to widower. And she felt a need to talk. If silence were allowed to fall, their situation would become absurd, lying there in this uninviting room, near a window covered with brown paper. 'Do you work in an office?'

'Yes.'

She was so afraid he would get up and resume his distant manner, that she nestled still closer to him, with a movement whose precision might pass as accidental.

He said nothing. That encouraged her. Her whole body vibrated, as though trying to take possession of the man, while she pressed her mouth against his, under the wiry moustache.

Mr. Hire's eyelids fluttered. Gently, he freed himself. Gently, too, he laid his cheek against Alice's cheek, so that they both lay with faces turned towards the ceiling.

'Don't move.'

He begged her in a whisper, squeezing her hand and panting slightly. His lips parted, and suddenly he got up, just as his eyes were filming over.

'I won't say anything,' he stuttered.

His jacket was rumpled up on his fat thighs. He walked over to the stove, while Alice, regardless of her disordered dress, sat up on the edge of the bed.

'After all, they can't do anything to you! And it means gaining time.'

She spoke calmly, her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands.

'I don't suppose you care if they suspect you.'

Mr. Hire was winding the alarm-clock.

'When it's all blown over he'll leave the district and we shall have nothing to worry about.'

Mr. Hire heard no more than the hum of her voice. He was tired, with a mixture of physical and moral weariness. She did not realize this at first and went on talking, standing up now, walking about the room. When she noticed that he looked like a wax image again, she held out her hand with a smile.

'Good night. I must go now.'

He put a limp hand in hers.

'You really do like me a little?' she urged.

Instead of replying, Mr. Hire opened the door, which he locked behind her.

Alice galloped down the stairs, crossed the courtyard in a breath of cold air, and arrived in her own room before her excitement had abated. At once she noticed the three sheets of brown paper which now concealed Mr. Hire, gave a satisfied smile, and again took off her blouse and skirt, stretched herself and finally removed her vest. She was winking at herself in the glass. She could imagine a tiny hole in the brown paper and Mr. Hire's eye lurking behind it as it had lurked at the keyhole.

She loitered, and even decided to wash herself all over, so as to wander naked all the longer in her brightly-lit room. But every now and then her expression changed to one of cold resentment and she snarled, as though uttering a threat:

'The idiot!'

But the idiot was not looking through the brown paper. He had remained standing with his hand on the key, leaning against the door, and what he was looking at was his own room, the white-faced alarm- clock on the black mantelpiece, the three-legged stove, the cupboard, the oilcloth and the coffee-pot, last of all his bed, with the unusual hollow in it.

Eventually, he let go of the key. His hand fell to his side. He heaved a sigh, and that was all, for that evening.

VI

To the Public Prosecutor, to the Public Prosecutor,

To the Public Prosecutor,

'To the Pub . . .'

Mr. Hire tore his sheet of pink blotting-paper into tiny scraps, threw them into the stove, and stood for a moment watching the flames. He had been

working hard. There were always a great many answers to his advertisements on Mondays, for humble people write their letters on Sunday mornings. And this time there had been Saturday's post left over to open.

All alone in his basement, he had tied up a hundred and twenty parcels, and this had meant three trips to the post office. The exercise did him good. During the third trip he had almost smiled when he caught sight of the discouraged face of the inspector who was trailing him, reflected in a window. It was not the same one as usual, but a little bearded fellow with bad teeth, who had been shivering outside No. 67 all day, with his coat collar turned up.

'To the Public Prosecutor,'

'To the . . .'

'To the . . .'

The past two hours since he finished his work Mr. Hire had spent doodling on his blotting-paper, scribbling words and crossing them out, and now he suddenly gave up the attempt to find an idea, to think of something clever and subtle, which would turn suspicion aside from the house at Villejuif.

At a few minutes to seven he made sure that the stove would gently burn itself out, switched off the light, and left the house, with his black briefcase under his arm. The little man was standing at the corner of the street and taking the trouble to pretend he was waiting to meet someone. All the way along the Boulevard Voltaire he kept close to the house-fronts, dodging behind some passer-by whenever Mr. Hire looked round. They must have forgotten to tell him it didn't matter.

He was undoubtedly married, a father, and unlucky: there was something indefinable about him that told one that. When Mr. Hire went into the restaurant where he lunched every day, with his own napkin in a pigeon-hole, the policeman stayed outside and walked three or four times, a faint, ghostly figure, past the steam-dimmed window.

There were paper tablecloths, the tables were very small, and the waitresses wore black dresses and white aprons; the menu was written in chalk on a big slate.

All the time he ate his black pudding and potatoes, Mr. Hire was thinking, racking his brains, and when he looked up it was to say, in an unnatural-sounding voice: 'Some red wine.'

This had never happened before. Never had he drunk anything except water or *café au lait.*

'A carafe?'

It made a ruby-red splash of colour, with a paler reflection on the white paper that covered the table. Mr. Hire poured a little wine into his glass and drowned it with water till it faded to pink. Just as he was drinking he saw the waitresses exchange glances, and he went on drinking, but the thrill was lost, the enjoyment spoilt. He smiled ironically.

When he came out the policeman was across the road, in an ill-lit bar, eating a *croissant* which he dipped in his coffee, and Mr. Hire saw him stuff half a *croissant* into his mouth, fumble in his pockets and fling down some coins on the counter.

A bus passed close beside the pavement. Mr. Hire could have jumped on the platform and left the inspector high and dry. He didn't do so. He went on walking, with his stomach thrust forward because he had eaten a good deal and, above all, because he was conscious of the importance of his every gesture.

He did not go far. Near the Place Voltaire was a big café, whose lights shone over nearly a hundred yards of the Boulevard. Mr. Hire went in, and the further he penetrated into the throng the more boldly he thrust out his chest, the more confidently he hugged the briefcase under his arm, while a smile began to hover on his lips.

To the left of the café was a cinema, which was under the same management, and which announced its programme by the uninterrupted ringing of a bell. It could be heard all over the place. The café was enormous. Down one side, people sat eating. Along the other side were tables covered with red cloths, where people were playing cards. At the far end were six billiard tables, lit by green arc-lights, and round these, shirt-sleeved men were moving with ceremonious gestures.

There were women and children about, waiting for Father to finish his game. Forty waiters ran to and fro between the rows of tables, calling:

'Look out, please!'

And on a platform a pianist, a violinist and a woman 'cellist were announcing the next item on their programme by hanging up number- cards on a brass rod.

Mr. Hire walked jauntily through all this. As he passed the cash-desk at the far end, the manager gave him a little bow all to himself.

From here the cinema bell could still be heard, and the orchestra tuning up, the click of the billiard balls, but other sounds now came through an open door, rolling noises followed by a kind of thunderclap.

Mr. Hire advanced towards the thunder. He went through the door, on the far side of which the glare of brilliant lights was replaced by austere, sparse lighting like that in a factory or laboratory. He took off his hat and overcoat, handed his briefcase to the waiter, and went into the cloakroom, where he combed his hair and washed his hands.

By the time he emerged, the policeman had plucked up courage enough to come in. He was sitting at a table in a corner, but had not dared to take off his overcoat. He must be feeling ill at ease and wondering whether this place was public or private.

It was a square room, roofed in with glass. There were only a few tables with glasses of beer on them, but nobody was sitting at them.

The people were further along, standing round four sets of skittles. On the wall hung a notice:

'Bowling Voltaire Club.'

And Mr. Hire advanced with the natural ease of a dancer, holding out a hand which everyone shook. Yes, everyone shook Mr. Hire by the hand, even the players who were holding a big, iron-encircled ball, and who interrupted their game for moment. They all knew Mr. Hire. They all greeted him.

'We've been waiting for you.'

'You're number four.'

The men had taken off their coats, and Mr. Hire took off his and laid it, neady folded, on a chair, not without casting a glance at the little policeman who was sitting all alone, over there, at one of the green tables.

'What shall I bring you, Mr. Hire?'

This from the waiter, who also knew him.

'Well, give me a kummel!'

So there! He had made up his mind to it. While waiting for his turn, he watched the game with a slightly disdainful eye, and at one moment the policeman heard him humming the waltz that the orchestra in the main café was playing.

'Your turn!'

Mr. Hire looked across at the inspector, heaved a sigh of satisfaction and said to his partner:

'You begin, please.'

He hunted among the big balls for his usual one, which he picked out, weighed in his hand, and rocked to and fro several times, before taking up his stand at a considerable distance from the board along which it must roll on its way to the skittles. His opponent had knocked down five of these.

Mr. Hire, leaning forward, one arm hanging loosely, was waiting for the skittles to be put up again, with his eyes half shut and his right foot feeling the ground, like a runner ready to sprint. Twenty people were watching him. The pink spots showed on his cheeks, and his lips were parted.

Suddenly he started off, running with short, pattering steps. It looked as though the heavy ball were carrying him with it, but a moment later it left his hand and rolled along the board, not very fast, spinning on its own axis. It hit the first skittle, and after that it behaved like a top, or rather as though it were thinking for itself. One would have sworn that it changed its direction now and then, determined to knock down the lot.

Just one skittle remained standing, while Mr. Hire frowned and wiped his damp palms with his handkerchief.

The waiter brought him his kummel, which he drank absentmindedly, in little sips, before picking up the ball which had been returned to him. His eyes were measuring, calculating, planning. He ran forward again with puckered brow, released his ball and stamped his foot on the ground, for this time, too, one of the nine skittles was left upright.

'You get so excited,' remarked the club Secretary, who was chief clerk in a Government office.

Mr. Hire did not reply. He had no time to reply. He wiped his hands again, carefully, down between the fingers, and mopped his forehead and the back of his neck. '. . . ha!' he grunted, just as the ball left his hand. He had no need to watch it roll. The spectators were applauding. And he, without a word, picked up his ball from the end of the trough along which they rolled it back to him, bent forward, and did his little pattering run. 'Nine!'

The nine skittles fell with a glorious rattling sound, all the more glorious because, for one anxious moment, the last of them had stood rocking to and fro, as though determined not to topple over. 'And nine again!'

Five nines running! He was panting for breath, covered with sweat to the tip of his chin. His hair was clinging to his temples.

He had finished. Smiling, he put his jacket on again for fear of catching cold, and strolled towards his companions. 'Have I another game to play?'

'Presently, against Godard.'

He did not join in any conversation. Holding his handkerchief in his clammy hands, he strolled nonchalantly from one game to another and watched the balls rolling, gave kindly applause for fours or fives.

The light, the warmth, the austere surroundings, the gravity of all these men, were reminiscent of a fencing saloon or a riding school. This was a serious business. There was not one woman present. Whereas the billiard players, on the other side of the door, were right out in the public eye, with the music playing and children roaming around the green tables. Further along, the card-players were watched by their wives, who kept asking:

'Why don't you cut in?'

And beyond them, again, was the cinema. Between these walls there were perhaps three thousand people drinking, eating, playing, smoking, and the various noises went on together without blending, without drowning one another, even the thin note of the bell that rang each time a drink was served, and the bell on the cash-till, whose ringing was preceded by the sound of the handle being turned.

Where was the little policeman? There was nobody now by the green-topped tables. Only his hat was still lying on the chair.

Mr. Hire, his hands in his pockets, took a stroll, and on reaching a point where he could see through the open door, he spotted his inspector talking to the waiter. He smiled and looked at his watch.

'You say he comes the first Monday of every month?'

'That's the club day. Some members practise on other days, but not him.'

The waiter was surprised, looked suspiciously at the inspector.

'If you're from the police you ought to know him, he's a police officer too, in fact he must be pretty high up in the force.'

'Oh! So he says he belongs to the police?'

'Everybody thought so even before he mentioned it. He looks as though he did.'

'Has he been a member of the club for long?'

'About two years. I remember, because I was already the waiter for the bowling-room. He came in timid-like, just the way you did, one evening, and he asked me if it was open to the public. He sat down over there, with his briefcase on his knee, and ordered a *café crème*. The game interested

him so much that he stayed there for two hours; then, when everybody had left, he stood the skitties up and had a go, all by himself. He went red in the face when he saw me watching, and it was me who advised him to join, seeing it only costs thirty francs a year . .

Mr. Hire was looking at them from a distance.

'And he was the one who mentioned the police?'

'For months we were wondering what his job could be. He's not the chatty kind. Even now he's the best player in the club, he doesn't meet any of the others except here. Anyhow, one day the Treasurer had made a bet that he'd find out, and he asked him point-blank.'

'Asked him what?'

'He said to him, "You're a big hat in the police, aren't you?"

'Mr. Hire blushed, and that gave him away. Then somebody remembered that police officers sometimes get free seats for theatres, and asked him if he had any to spare. He brings some along nearly every time now . . .'

When the inspector went back to the bowling-room, Mr. Hire was finishing his second game; and as the award of the monthly poultry prize depended on it, everybody was crowding round. To-day's prize was a turkey, which the Treasurer had put out on a table near the players. People had come in from the billiard-tables, to watch the end of the match.

Mr. Hire went to and fro, in his shirt sleeves, with well-curled moustache and red lips. All his movements were marked by a preternatural ease. His feet trod at the exact spot where they ought to tread. His arm made the ball describe a trajectory of geometrical precision.

The club President's wife stood waiting for her husband, buttoning her grey cotton gloves and gazing at the turkey, whose yellow breast she had already pinched.

'Nine!'

There was a mechanical accuracy about it. Mr. Hire was unconscious of the spectators. They were only a background, a row of statues to either side of the game. While waiting for the skittles to be re-erected, he went so far as to toss the ball casually in the air, catching it again with three fingers in the holes. The inspector was one of the nearest onlookers, and it was perhaps for his benefit that Mr. Hire added a touch of bravado to his style, whirling his arm three times before finally making his shot.

'Nine!'

At this he held out a hand towards the crowd.

'A scarf,' he requested tersely.

Someone produced a grey scarf and he tied it round his head, blindfolding himself. He reached out his hand again, groping to find the ball. 'Eight!'

Applause broke out as he pulled off the scarf and murmured hesitantly:

'Whose is this?'

He had one more shot to play, and he was trying to think of some other fantastic trick, no matter what. He was bound to bring it off! He was no longer skipping. He was bouncing, light as a balloon.

'Three more points and you've won,' announced the Secretary.

For a moment he stood still, as though scared; then he walked to the end of the board along which the ball must run, turned his back to it, straddled his legs apart. He saw the poor little inspector standing in front of him. He raised the ball level with his head and flung it behind him, between his knees.

'Seven!'

Everybody was talking at once. They were putting on their jackets and overcoats. They were leaving. Mr. Hire went up to the President's wife.

'Allow me to offer you . . .'

He pointed to the turkey.

'On one condition, that you come along and help us to eat it.'

'I'm so sorry, I really can't. My duties . . .'

It was all over. Nobody was paying any more attention to him. Hands were being shaken absentmindedly.

'See you to-morrow?'

And the clicking of billiard balls was again the dominant sound. The waiter had switched off half the lights, as they do in a circus the moment the last turn is finished, and the place had the dusty glow and the empty feeling of a circus, too. Mr. Hire, however, had not worked off all that liveliness that seethed within him. He was pacing up and down, unheeded, unnoticed, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and suddenly he came to a stop in front of the inspector, who stood counting the change he had just received from the waiter.

'Well, my little man?'

The words came out spontaneously, emphatically, and Mr. Hire's face had a protective look.

'Funny job I've let you in for, haven't I?'

In spite of everything his lips were quivering, with excitement rather than fear. The policeman was perhaps equally ill at ease, for after coughing behind his hand, he stuttered:

'Are you speaking to me?'

'Joseph, my overcoat!' called Mr. Hire instead of answering.

The club President took him aside.

'My wife tells me ... Won't you really take your turkey? Somebody would be glad to have it.. .'

'No, I assure you . . .' he said, with a chilly smile.

Nobody could have explained why the evening always finished like this, with a sort of anti-climax. There was only a group of four or five members of the committee left, discussing some new rules. They merely waved good-bye to Mr. Hire from a distance and, as soon as his back was turned, nudged one another, muttered together, called the waiter.

'Who was that other fellow?'

'The little bearded chap in the shabby overcoat? A police inspector.'

They exchanged delighted glances.

'What did I tell you?'

Mr. Hire went through the main room with his briefcase under his arm, swimming against the stream. It was the interval at the cinema, and the audience was pouring out into the café. He was jostled, pinned in between people's elbows. He hat was pushed off and he found it three steps further on, balancing on someone's shoulder.

He stood, hesitating, at the edge of the pavement, in the orange glow from the neon sign. The boulevard was deserted, except for such of the cinema audience as did not want a drink, who were lounging in the shadows, smoking cigarettes and waiting for the bell to ring again.

A couple of yards further along, also on the edge of the pavement, the inspector was stamping his feet and turning up his overcoat collar, as a cold drizzle was beginning to fall.

'To the Public Prosecutor…'

'To the Pub . . .'

Indecision could be read in Mr. Hire's attitude. From his left came the sound of an engine starting up, and he caught sight of the President of the club and his wife in a shaky little closed car. The turkey, roughly wrapped in a sheet of newspaper, lay in the woman's lap.

As they went past Mr. Hire, the President waved his hand, but his wife did not even notice.

In the middle of the boulevard five taxis were waiting, one behind the other, and Mr. Hire beckoned. The first driver got out to crank the engine. The inspector's face clouded.

'To Villejuif, just beyond the cross-roads. I'll tell you when to stop.'

The taxi smelt of face-powder and there was a faded carnation lying on the seat. Looking through the closed window, Mr. Hire watched the bearded inspector still hesitating and finally setting out on foot towards the Métro.

The kummel was giving him heartburn. His knees were shaking, as they did on the first Monday of each month after he had been playing skittles.

It was a slow cooling-down process. Mr. Hire gradually sank to the temperature of the taxi. His tension, his over-excitement, his verve left him, and he buried himself to the nose in the collar of his coat. Without moving from his seat or slowing down, the driver opened the door with one hand and shouted, leaning out a few inches: 'Shall I go by the Porte d'Italie?'

'Whichever way you like.'

The door slammed. The window slid down an inch and straight away an icy draught made itself felt.

'To the Public Prosecutor . . .'

They drove past the waste ground where the woman had been killed. The driver must have known about it, for he slowed down to stare at the hoarding. As usual, a prostitute was standing at the corner of the street, and she gazed indifferently after the taxi.

It was difficult to rouse the concierge. When Mr. Hire called his name as he passed in front of the lodge, he heard a bed creak. He went slowly up the four flights of stairs and the light had gone out by the time he reached his own landing.

On opening his door he frowned, surprised by something unusual. It was not pitch-dark in the room. There was a reddish glow on the floor, a faint crackling, and the air was warm.

Switching on the light, he saw the fire was lit, and that his coffee-pot stood steaming on the stove. His bed had been turned down. A glass in the middle of the table held four or five flowers, rather melancholy ones, it was true, for Villejuif sells few flowers except those suitable for cemeteries.

Mr. Hire shut the door behind him and, without waiting to take off his coat, crossed to the window, lifted up a corner of the brown paper. The light

in the opposite room was still on. But Alice had fallen asleep. Her book had slipped down on the eiderdown. The girl's eyes were closed, her breast rose and fell to the rhythm of her regular breathing; her head was cradled on one arm, which was bent so that the reddish hair of the armpit could be seen.

'To the Public Prosecutor .. .'

He was almost stamping with impatience and helplessness.

'To the Pub . . .'

With a furious gesture he ruffled his hair and began to undress, glancing from time to time at the flowers, the bed, the lighted stove.

Then he went back to the window. Alice had straightened her arm. She was now lying on her back, and had pushed off the eiderdown. Her full, heavy breasts were pointing up through the cotton nightdress.

The evening before, she had been lying on Mr. Hire's bed. He sat down on it to take off his socks, went barefoot to half-close the stove and removed the piping-hot coffee-pot.

Finally, after a last sidelong glance, he pulled down the brown paper over the window. His light went out. His bed creaked. Something went clattering through space along the road: this was the express lorry from Lyons, travelling at sixty miles an hour with an eight-ton load. Even after the noise had died away, the cup still quivered on the saucer.

It was an hour before Mr. Hire's breathing became regular. One hand was hanging out of the bed. Every time he breathed out his lips parted with a 'pfff. ..' and the lower edge of his moustache quivered.

He was still asleep, as on every other morning, when the girl got up at six o'clock, stopped the ringing of her alarm clock and put her clothes on without washing, her eyes heavy with sleep and a sticky feeling in her mouth, to go and swill out the shop and deliver the milk.

VII

'BOLDNESS does it!' Mr. Hire kept assuring himself.

And as he made his way along, he mumbled continually:

'Sorry . . . Sorry . . .'

It was raining cats and dogs, and the problem this morning was not how to slip through the crowd, but how to steer an umbrella through the mass of other umbrellas. The umbrella cover was so wet that, once in the tram, Mr. Hire had to hold it at arm's length.

'Boldness does it!'

The inspector was sitting opposite him, not the little bearded fellow but the one who was always in the concierge's lodge, and Mr. Hire was fixing him with an unblinking stare. The tram jangled its bell and set off towards Paris. In spite of the depressing weather and the sullen faces around him, Mr. Hire stuck out his chest as he had done the night before when he was playing skittles, and sat very upright on his bench. He looked out from under his inky-black eyebrows with the glare that grown-ups turn on noisy children to frighten them into silence. With slow, ceremonious movements, when the conductor approached, he took off his glove, brought out his pocket-book, and produced his season-ticket from it.

'Boldness does it!'

At the Port d'Italie he ignored the Métro and seated himself in a bus, in the first-class section, while the inspector stayed outside on the platform. As he drew near to his destination, he was overcome by a kind of giddy impatience. In the Place du Châtelet he literally flung himself out of the bus and scampered along the Quai des Orfèvres.

'Boldness does it!'

Not till he was mounting the dusty expanse of stairs in Police Headquarters did he unfold the paper summoning him there for the following day, and read the superintendent's name.

'Superintendent Godet, please?' he was asking the office-boy a moment later.

And he shot a piercing glance at the lad, sighed, fidgeted a little with his feet, like a gentleman in a great hurry who ought to be admitted at once.

'Were you sent for?'

'Yes . . . No . . . Take him my card . . .'

An hour went by. At first there were five visitors waiting in the glass-panelled room furnished with green armchairs, at the end of a passage that echoed like a drum, along which people were continually walking, stopping, starting off again, opening doors and walking further. Then there were seven visitors, then only six, then three, then five again. The messenger came from time to time to call one of them, but it was never Mr. Hire.

'You aren't forgetting me?'

No! The messenger shook his head, and went up to a nondescript young woman who had been the last to arrive.

'Was it you who asked to see Monsieur Godet? Will you please come this way?'

All the same, it was with an air of importance that Mr. Hire paced up and down the waiting-room, his briefcase under his arm, or paused under the tablet bearing the names of policemen killed in the war. At last the messenger came back, jerked his chin at him, and went off along the corridor without attempting to see whether anyone was following him. He opened a door and stood back. A man seated at a mahogany desk, bending over some papers he was signing, said without looking up:

'Shut the door. Sit down.'

He went on signing, while Mr. Hire, his briefcase on his knees, made a last attempt to puff out his chest.

'What do you want?'

'I had a summons to come here to-morrow.'

'I know that. Well?'

He was still signing away. He had not once raised his head, and could hardly know what his visitor looked like.

'I thought the best thing would be to make a frank, sincere approach . . .'

The superintendent glanced at him for a fraction of a second, his indifferent expression touched with the merest shade of surprise.

'You mean you've come to confess?' he inquired simply, as he resumed his writing.

Mr. Hire made a superhuman effort and spoke in a confident voice.

'I came of my own accord to talk to you as man to man, and I give you my word of honour, as man to man, that I am innocent and that I never set eyes on that woman who was murdered. We're wasting your time and mine. For the last three days your inspectors have been following me about, searching my drawers and ...'

'Now wait a minute!'

The superintendent looked up, his eyes still full of the work he had just been doing.

'Do you want your interrogation to take place to-day?'

'I was saying . . .'

'If so, would you prefer a lawyer to be present?'

'Since I am innocent, and as I shall explain to you . . .'

The superintendent touched a bell. Mr. Hire opened his mouth, but the other signed to him to keep quiet. The door opened.

'Come in, Lamy. Sit down here and take a statement.'

The desk was a mass of papers, and every now and then the superintendent picked one up, as though at random, and read it attentively, but this did not prevent him from speaking.

'Tell me, Mr. Hire, what were you doing on the night of the crime?'

'I was at home, in my room, as I always am in the evening. I went to bed and . . .'

'Are you able to prove that?'

'The concierge will tell you so.'

'That's just it. The concierge says you got home at about ten-past seven, as usual, but that you must have gone out again, because you called for the door to be opened from outside, during the night.'

'But that's nonsense!'

He smiled again.

'I had no reason to go out. As for killing a woman . . .'

He looked uneasily at the young man, who was writing steadily.

'So you had no witness to your having been at home?'

'That's to say .. . No!'

He was already discomfited, and exclaimed, suddenly blushing crimson:

'I'll be absolutely frank with you. That's why I came here. I did not kill the woman. I know who committed the crime, but I can't say so. Do you understand the position? As one man to another, I wanted ...'

'Don't let us get confused, Mr. Hire. Incidentally, your name is not Hire.'

He drew another paper towards him.

'Your name is Hirovitch.'

'Hirovitch *alias* Hire. My father was called Hire in his time.'

'He was Polish, I see. Born at Vilna.'

'Russian. A Russian Jew! In those days Vilna belonged to Russia.'

There was no more thought of boldness, of explaining things man to man. From now on he replied with the timid humility of a schoolboy being questioned.

'Well, Mr. Hirovitch, you who were talking just now about your word of honour, I see, to begin with, that your father, who was a tailor in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, went bankrupt. You were born in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, weren't you? And your mother's nationality was ... let me see . . .'

'Armenian.'

This was perfectly true, but sounded a lie. Mr. Hire was miserable at not being able to explain.

'The bankruptcy investigation revealed that in addition to his business as a tailor, your worthy father occasionally went in for money-lending.'

How could he get a chance to describe the little shop in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, smelling of cloth and tailor's chalk, the single back room where they had to live, the gas burning all day long, and old father Hire, so good, so dignified, so scrupulous in observing the rites of the Jewish religion? He might not have been French, but he wasn't Russian either. He spoke only Yiddish, and his fat Armenian wife, as yellow as a quince, had never been able to understand him properly.

Bankruptcy? Money-lending? But not once in the course of a year did old Mr. Hire cut out a suit from new cloth. He used to turn old jackets. He would make children's clothes from old trouser-legs. And sometimes he would accept receipts from the municipal pawnbroker's by way of payment.

During the last few years of her life, the mother had been too swollen to move, and every night young Hire and his father had been obliged to hoist her onto her bed.

'I assure you, superintendent. . .'

'Just a moment. You chose French nationality. So you are a Frenchman. But you were excused from military service because of a weak heart.'

He shot him a glance which seemed to measure the breadth of his shoulders, estimate his chest-expansion, take note of his flabbiness.

'Have you ever been ill?'

'Not really ill, but. . '

'What did you do after the bankruptcy, when your father died?'

The superintendent seemed to be bored, and he was still turning over documents and reading them during the replies.

'I was a shop assistant at a ready-made tailor's in the Rue Saint-Antoine.'

'To be more exact, a "barker". A tout. You used to stop people as they went past on the pavement, and persuade them to come in. Will you tell me why you gave up this kind of work, which, after all, was quite honourable?'

Mr. Hire turned pale as though forced to confess to a crime.

'In the winter I felt the cold, and . . .'

'Other people feel the cold, and yet remain respectable.'

'Well, I.. .'

'You are forgetting, Mr. Hire, that you served a six months' sentence for obscenity.'

He said nothing. There was nothing left for him to say. It was not worth trying. But his eyes never left the superintendent's face. Indeed they were fixed on it, with the expression of a beaten animal, wondering why men are so cruel.

'I see that six years ago you set up as publisher in the Rue Notre-Dame de Lorette. When I say publisher ... You specialized in more or less indecent books, and in what you described in trade terms as "works of flagellation". One of those books brought you to court and cost you six months. But that isn't the main point. The firm was there before you took it over. You bought up the stock for thirty thousand francs. Do you mind telling me where you got the thirty thousand francs?'

He did not flinch, made no attempt to reply.

'A week before, you were freezing on the pavement in the Rue Saint-Antoine, and you were hardly earning enough to eat. But you paid cash down for the business.'

'There was someone backing me.'

'Who?'

'I can't tell you. Someone asked me to run the business for him. I was his manager.'

'And it was you who went to prison. Very well! Incidentally, you were released a month before the end of your sentence, because you had behaved yourself. What did you turn to then?'

The superintendent pulled forward another paper.

'A dirty little legal swindle. The "hundred francs a day without leaving your job" trick and the paint-box dodge. You tempt poor people with your advertisement, and since you do send them something for their money, you can't be had up. Tell me, Mr. Hire or Hirvotch, didn't you come here to give me your word of honour?'

'I didn't kill that woman. You must believe me when I say I didn't kill her. I am in no need of money, and . . .'

'Gently, there! There's nothing to prove that the poor creature was murdered for her money. And lonely bachelors have been known, now and then, to indulge suddenly in . . .'

Mr. Hire rose abruptly, breathless, as white as a sheet.

'Sit down. I'm not arresting you yet. One more question: do you often associate with women? Can you tell me of two or three, or even of one?'

Mr. Hire shook his head.

'Do you understand me? For years you published smut for nasty old men. You aren't married, you have no mistress. I know what you're going to tell me. I know the house you go to now and then. But it so happens that the girls in that house find you odd and worrying. The other tenants in your building call away their little girls, and even their little boys, when they play games too close to you. Why not make a clean breast of it, Mr. Hire? Here's a piece of advice: go and see a solicitor. Tell him your little story. He will ask for a mental report, and . . .'

Mr. Hire's mouth was open, but the words of protest would not come.

'That's all you have to say to me to-day, isn't it? Sign your statement. You can read it first.'

The superintendent rang his bell and asked the office boy:

'Is there anyone else for me?'

'No.'

And he went out first, while the young inspector, with an air of utter indifference, offered a pen to Mr. Hire.

'Your hat's on the chair.'

'Thank you . . . Sorry . . .'

In his office, the cellar in the Rue Saint-Maur, there was a piece of looking-glass, and Mr. Hire inspected himself, under the lamp fearing to discover something abnormal in his appearance. But no! He had his mother's very dark, almost blue-black, hair. His moustache was neatly curled, his mouth well-shaped and bright red. He was rather fat, but that did not stop him remaining nimble and being the star of the bowling club.

He thought of his father, sitting in the evening in the doorway of his shop in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, stroking his long, white beard with his delicate hands. He was as pale and lean as a prophet, always grave and slow, capable of going on talking by himself for hours, in a low, inward voice, as he sat cross-legged on his work-table.

Dishonest—that man? If people couldn't understand that, what could they understand?

And Mr. Hire, who felt limp, drained of all spirit, automatically wrapped up forty-two parcels, labelled them, and filled in the registration forms for the post.

When he got home, at ten-past seven, the concierge, who was in the passage, hurried back to her lodge without greeting him. A little boy who was going upstairs in front of Mr. Hire began to run and hammered with both fists on his parents' door.

Mr. Hire lit his stove, wound up the alarm-clock, and went, item by item, through all his daily ritual. While the water was heating for the coffee he laid the table, swept up some crumbs that had fallen on the floor the previous evening, even took an old nail and raked out two pieces of fluff from between the floorboards.

There were the same noises as on other days, plus the rain, which was running down a spout alongside the window. The baby upstairs must be ill, for the doctor called, there was whispering on the landing and even on the stairs, because the father took hold of the doctor's arm and accompanied him all the way down, to get at the truth.

Mr. Hire washed up, and rubbed his two knives on an emery board. Ten times he went past his washstand. Ten times he stared at himself suspiciously in the glass, forcing himself to smile in order to discover what his smile looked like, then glaring sternly into space.

At last he sat down, as tired as though he had been playing skittles all day. But he could not bear to go on sitting doing nothing, and he went over to his wardrobe, fetched a shoe-box, laid it on the table and tipped out the contents.

There were old papers, old photographs, and, in a pocketbook with a red rubber band round it, some Government Bonds.

There was a knock on the door. A woman's voice said at once:

'It's me!'

She had just finished tidying up her employer's flat, and her hands were still red and damp.

'Can I come in and say good evening?'

She had thrown a coat over her shoulders to cross the courtyard, and she let it slip off onto a chair.

'Have they been bothering you again to-day?'

Her manner was easy and unaffected. Coming nearer to the table she saw the photographs and picked up one of them, glanced up.

'What's this?'

'My class, at the council school.'

'But which is you?'

There were fifty boys in four rows, with potted plants at either end. They were all dressed in their Sunday best, and some held themselves very stiffly, with chins up, while others looked sullenly at the camera as if they were full of mistrust.

'There,' said Mr. Hire, pointing.

She laughed.

'Is that really you?'

With a nervous giggle, Alice could not help comparing the photograph with Mr. Hire.

'How old were you?'

'Eleven.'

Eleven! And he didn't look like a kid! Nor like a man, either. One could pick him out from the rest in the photograph at a first glance.

He was no taller than they, but he was so fat that he no longer looked in the least childish. His bare thighs were enormous, a little off the straight, his knees padded with fat. He had a double chin, and his eyes stared out fixedly and dejectedly from his pudding-face.

He could never have played in the courtyard or on the playing-fields with the other kids, he could have had nothing to say to them, in fact, for he was already like a little old man, solemn and short-winded.

'You know, you've got thinner.'

It was true. As he grew older, Mr. Hire had dwindled to a normal girth, and all that remained of the photograph was his strange flabbiness, his unnaturally rounded figure, and the mouth, too clearly outlined in his indecisive face.

'Was it an illness?'

'No. I took after my mother.'

He was not looking at the girl. He had stopped glancing at his own reflection. Twice, he put out his hand to take back the photo.

'Have you any others?'

He had, but he hid them, pushed them quickly into an envelope, left nothing on the table except the pocketbook with the rubber band round it. The auburn fluff on the back of Alice's neck was very close to his eyes as he suddenly said:

'I've been thinking. There's only one way out: will you go away with me?'

At this she turned her head slowly, and stared at him, speechless, in stupefaction. And he, with agitated fingers, pulled off the rubber band, opened the pocketbook, and spread the Government Bonds out on the table.

'There are eighty thousand francs' worth here. I shall keep on earning more . . .'

It had come out so simply, so unexpectedly, that even he felt taken aback, for this was the most extraordinary moment of his life, its culminating point. Yet everything was happening unemotionally, unimpressively. Alice was sitting down on the edge of the table and putting her hands on his shoulders.

'My poor dear!'

'What?'

'Nothing! I only wish we could. It's not much fun living here. But. . .'

'But what?'

'Everything!'

And she walked across the room, picked up the alarm-clock, put it down in another place.

'To begin with, Émiie wouldn't let us get away. He'd be sure to find us in the end, and he'd make no bones about. . .'

'I've thought of that. We needn't be afraid of him.'

She opened her eyes wide, waited motionless for what would come next. And Mr. Hire, putting the Bonds into the pocketbook again, explained hesitatingly.

'Suppose we began by going to Switzerland, travelling separately. As soon as we were across the frontier, we'd send a telegram.'

'To the police?' she cried with a start.

And he answered simply:

'Yes. They arrest him. After the trial we come back and . ..'

Alice kept a grip on herself. She stared fiercely at the floor, struggling to get her breathing under control. She found herself looking at Mr. Hire's slippers and the turn-ups of his trousers. She swallowed twice, and at last managed to raise her head and produce something resembling a smile.

'I don't quite know . . .' she whispered.

'It's the only way. I've been thinking it over. Now it's your turn to think.'

He came a step closer and took her hand in both his, which were hot and moist.

'Will you trust me? I think I could make you happy.'

She could not manage to speak. Her hand lay like a dead weight, her eyes were staring.

'We could live in the country . . .'

His hands travelled up her bare arm as far as the elbow. Mr. Hire moved much closer.

'Let me know to-morrow . . .'

And he suddenly laid his cheek on the dairy-maid's shoulder. She could see him in the mirror, his eyes closed, his lips parted in a faint smile.

'Don't say no straight away!'

It was the warmest part of his cheek, the round rosy patch, that was touching Alice's skin.

VIII

WHILE she was undressing, with those few movements which custom had turned into a ritual, and which brought the lines of her body gradually into dearer evidence, until the moment when the white nightdress was pulled over it, the dairy-maid avoided turning her face towards the blank stare of the three sheets of brown paper. She could display her breasts and hips. She could press her thighs and stomach against Mr. Hire, and she would not have shrunk away if he had responded to the invitation, instead of closing his eyes in tender emotion.

What she could not do was to let him see her face, which was merely sullen and preoccupied.

As soon as her nightdress was on she switched off the light and, to be on the safe side, got into bed for a moment, while the light in the room opposite went out in its turn. She had been thinking so hard that her forehead felt as though barred with iron. She got up noiselessly, groped for her shoes, slipped her bare feet into them, then put on her green coat over her nightdress. She had already opened the door when she turned back and picked up off her dressing-table a bottle which had once contained hydrogen peroxide.

When the sleepy concierge worked the mechanism of the front door, Alice was greeted by a gust of wind which dashed her with raindrops from head to foot. The road was bare and glistening. The last tram was waiting at the stop, in a halo of yellow light, on the far side of the crossroads. One of the cafés was still open.

Close to her, right in the doorway, the girl saw a shadowy figure and paused for a moment before plunging out onto the wet pavement.

'So you're there?' she remarked calmly.

It was the youngest of the inspectors who stood, with his coat collar turned up, huddled in the far corner of the entrance.

'A nice job, yours! I don't feel well. I've caught cold. So I got up to fetch some rum.'

She showed him her little bottle.

'Would you like me to go for it?'

'And what if he came out while you were away.'

Her voice sounded quite natural. She walked close to the wall, head lowered, feet splashing into puddles, and the inspector watched her go into the corner *bistro*, where the glass-paned door set a bell ringing as it opened. Four men were still playing cards there, and the wife of one of them was waiting.

'I want some rum please.'

And as the proprietor poured some into a pewter measure:

'Hasn't Émile been?'

'He left at least an hour ago.'

'Alone?'

'Alone,' replied the man with a wink.

'I'll pay to-morrow. I haven't brought my bag. When you see Emile, tell him I want to speak to him.'

Her grey, drawn face betrayed anxiety, but her voice was calm, her manner normal. She went out, carrying her bottle, and without glancing at the empty cross-roads, from which the tram was now noisily departing, she walked back under the house walls, her shoulders getting wetter and wetter and the hair beginning to curl on her forehead because of the damp.

The inspector was waiting for her, standing very upright now. He had straightened his hat, which, before, had been pulled right down to his ears, and as Alice put out her hand to ring, he stopped her.

'What's the hurry?'

Obediently, she turned towards him, and the man, bending forward to look through the opening of her coat, exclaimed:

'But you're in your nightdress!'

'Of course.'

'And you've nothing on underneath?'

He smiled, and extended a hand to touch the top of the white cotton nightdress.

'Your fingers are frozen.'

'Is this better?'

His hand closed round her full breast, above the nightdress, and the inspector went on:

'One would never think there was so much of it!' . Alice was waiting, still holding her bottle, and she leant back against the door, while the man came nearer, standing in the rain, cutting off her view of the road, talking to her from so near that she could feel his breath on her face.

'To think that you're going back to a nice warm bed, while I have to spend the night out here!'

His hand was still squeezing her breast, which had not even quivered, and he put his face close to the girl's neck, sniffing at it, now and then pressing his lips against it, at the roots of her hair.

'You're tickling! So you haven't finished your inquiry yet?' Big drops of cold water were falling from the brim of his hat onto Alice's hand.

'It won't be long now, unfortunately. And then I shan't be able to enjoy these pretty things any more . . .'

She smiled non-committally. 'Are they going to arrest him?'

'It won't need much. One more little clue. He's feeling hunted. As soon as that happens, they never fail to make blunders.'

'You're hurting,' she protested, as he crushed her breast. 'You don't like that?'

'Yes,' she said, without conviction. He smiled, his mouth an inch away from hers.

"This sex-maniac business thrills you, doesn't it now? Of course it does! I've noticed it! Women are all the same . ..'

Her legs were frozen, her feet soaking in her shoes, and the man's fingers still clutching the same breast had begun to feel as though they were scorching her.

'Do you suppose you'll arrest him to-morrow?'

'If it depended on me, I'd never arrest him, so as to . . .' And leaning forward, he pressed his mouth against hers, and straightened up, delighted.

'But we might meet somewhere else . . .'

'We might,' she rejoined, taking advantage of this respite to pull the bell.

'You'll dream about me?'

'Perhaps.'

As the door opened he put his foot against it, went in after Alice, took her in his arms in the dark passage. She could see the lighter patch of the sky through the opening into the yard, could smell the breath of the cold, rainy night, and the cigarette smell from her companion's mouth. Without taking his lips from hers, he was kneading her with both hands, from the thighs to the shoulders, and his knees were beginning to shake.

'Careful! . . .' she murmured.

And she fled towards the courtyard while he, satisfied, shut the door and went back to his corner, turning up his collar again and gazing with a smile at the shiny cross-roads and the corner café, where the shutters were being closed as the last customers said good-bye on the threshold and went their way down the different streets.

Alice sat on her bed, gradually warming her feet in her hands.

Mr. Hire, his hat already on his head, lifted up a corner of the brown paper and looked with cosy regret, through the curtain of rain, at the empty room opposite, the unmade bed in a hollow of which lay a hairpin.

But just as he was going out, his briefcase under his arm, he came back, took the cardboard box out of the wardrobe, and removed the pocketbook with the elastic band. When he finally opened the door, the Government Bonds were in his briefcase, and moreover he had torn up his school photograph.

This was the hour when the house was full of a myriad noises, children leaving for school, men dressing and hunting in vain for the things they needed, and the coalman coming upstairs, filling the whole width of the staircase with the sack on his back.

Mr. Hire was going down with his usual dignity, when he saw a door open on the second floor and found himself face to face with the inspector, coming out of someone's flat.

He said nothing. Neither did the inspector. But their eyes met for a second, and Mr. Hire felt almost ill as a result, as though his breakfast lay like a lump in his stomach.

He went on down the stairs. A woman's hand emerged from a room to hold back a child who was just leaving, and in the passage, where rainwater

was trickling in from outside, five or six tenants were clustered round the concierge, in front of the lodge.

As he went past they all stopped talking. Out of habit, Mr. Hire touched his bowler hat, puffed out his chest and went on, his step more jerky than usual.

The wet, heavy wind caught hold of him as it had caught hold of Alice during the night. In front of the dairy, nothing had been left outside except pumpkins and milk-cans. Mr. Hire scarcely turned his head, but he caught a glimpse of Alice's rosy face, her white overall and bare arms, behind the counter. She watched him as far as the tram-stop.

He looked the other way. There was only one house opposite his own; it was a removal business, and four men were standing at the door, with the little bearded inspector, observing him from a distance.

He began to walk faster. He had forgotten to put up his umbrella. Just as he reached the cross-roads, he wheeled round and saw that quite a large group was standing at his own house-door. The little bearded inspector had dashed forward. They got to the tram almost at the same moment, and there the policeman was met by a colleague.

So there were at least three of them at Villejuif. Mr. Hire half-heard the words:

'What did the chief say?'

He held his breath in vain; he couldn't hear what came after that. The tram started off. The two men remained standing on the platform, and as they talked, one of them turned from time to time towards Mr. Hire.

Only one followed him into the Métro, but that made it all the more disturbing. In the Rue Saint-Maur the fire would not light, and Mr. Hire spent more than a quarter of an hour kneeling in front of the stove, blowing to make it draw.

He had no need to go to the window and look for the inspector. The man had now discovered the little *bistro* next door and was sitting just inside its glass front, chatting with the waitress as she polished the bar-top and the coffee machine.

But he might come out at any moment. And at the stage things had reached, he probably would not hesitate to squat down and stare in at the barred window.

Mr. Hire set to work to collect hundreds of paintboxes which were stacked at the far end of the cellar, and build them into a kind of wall in the

middle of the room. He was not hurried. He was working slowly but steadily, at his usual pace.

When he found he could sit down without his hands being seen from outside, he fetched his overcoat, a pair of scissors, and a tin box which he took from a filing-cabinet.

He spent two hours in unpicking and sewing up again the striped sateen lining of the sleeves, which was thicker than the rest of the lining. He wore a thimble, like a tailor, and bit his lower lip as he worked. At last the Government Bonds were safely sewn in, and with the same slow persistence, Mr. Hire demolished his rampart of paintboxes.

The fire had gone out. There was no more wood left. He put on his overcoat and set out to buy some at the coalman's. Passing the *bistro* next door, he noticed the inspector, sitting happily with a glass of hot toddy in front of him, holding forth for the edification of the waitress and the proprietor. Catching sight of him, the policeman started in alarm and hurried to the door, but had no need to leave his shelter, for Mr. Hire was already going into the coal merchant's shop.

When Mr. Hire came back, with a dozen bundles of kindling, the little *bistro* looked just the same. The three people inside were as still as statues. But hardly had he gone past the window, when the proprietor and the waitress ran to the door, even came out onto the pavement to get a better view of him.

All this did not stop his doing twenty-three parcels, with the labels, the registration slips and all. The stove was roasting his back now, the lamp on his table was lit, the window to his right had become a grey rectangle, crossed by feet and legs and sometimes by the spindly wheels of a perambulator.

By the time the last label was addressed he had also managed to write two letters, so cautiously inspector would have known nothing about it even if he had been watching him closely. The first was to Victor, the café waiter who served the bowling club.

'My dear Victor, 'You are the only person to whom I can turn for the following service.

When you get this note, please jump into a taxi and go to the Villejuif cross-roads. On the right there is a dairy; go in there and buy something.

You will certainly see the assistant, a red-haired girl, and be able to get the enclosed letter into her hands without being noticed.

'I rely on you. I will explain another time. Meanwhile, thank you.'

He selected a brand new hundred-franc note and re-read the second letter, which was for Alice.

'I will be waiting for you at the Gare de Lyon at 5.40 tomorrow morning.

Take every possible precaution. No need to bring any luggage. I love you.'

The whole thing went into a thin yellow envelope like the ones he used for his customers. Mr. Hire sat for a long time staring at it, as exhausted as though after several hours' physical effort.

At last he put on his coat and hat, picked up his heap of little parcels, and set out through the rain to the post office. The bearded inspector was following him without enthusiasm. As usual Mr. Hire spent a good five minutes at the counter, and when he left, his note to Victor was already speeding to its destination by express post.

The post office was practically empty, and resembled a railway station, with the dog-eared posters on the walls, the government-model clock, the trickles of water on its paved floor. Mr. Hire did not go away. He had no reason, now, to be in one place rather than another. He had hours ahead of him. The office in the Rue Saint-Maur had ceased to be his office. His room at Villejuif was no longer his room. His home, now, was the black velvet-collared overcoat, its sleeves and shoulders padded with stiff paper.

The inspector was getting bored with waiting for him, and Mr. Hire deliberately read all the posters, one by one.

It was an extraordinary afternoon. The rain came down harder and harder. People hesitated before stepping off a pavement, as though the roads had been torrents. Taxis drove slowly, for fear of skidding. The newspapers on the stands were being gradually reduced to pulp.

And now, while everyone else in Paris was crouching under the rain, and all faces were scowling, doorways holding groups of ten people, customers fidgeting in the little bars, waiting for a pause in the downpour, Mr. Hire was transfigured by gaiety.

Holding his umbrella very straight, he was going to and fro as the fancy took him, with no fear of getting mud-splashed or of being late. He would stop in front of shop-windows. He bought some chocolates at a sweet-shop, put the bag in his pocket and pulled one out now and then, to suck it slowly.

It was as though the doors of time and space had been thrown open before him. He had nothing to do. He did not have to be anywhere in

particular.

And the most wonderful thing was that this holiday was limited. At five o'clock next morning, at five-forty to be exact, it would be over. He would take his seat in a railway carriage, opposite a woman. He would lean forward to speak to her. When the man from the dining-car came to offer tickets, he would say: 'Two!'

Two! He skipped. He got his umbrella hooked up on other people's. He was roaming along streets where it had never occurred to him to set foot in the days when a lifetime lay ahead of him with all the days and hours it contained.

Now he had only eleven hours, only ten! The lights of Paris were being turned on, and he stopped at a jeweller's shop in the *grands boulevards.* Thousands of rings lay there, crudely lit, but Mr. Hire remembered the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, where jewellery is less expensive because most of it comes from the pawnbroker's.

He did not take a bus or a tram. It was more enjoyable to walk in the dazzling light from the shop windows, then along the darker streets where the only gleam came from the wet, cobble-stoned pavements.

It was not a tailor's now in the house where he had been born, but a gramophone shop. Yet the windows on the first floor—where the ceiling was so low that one could hardly stand upright—were still exactly the same; it looked as though they even had the same curtains. And why not? Who would be likely to change them?

The inspector was floundering along behind in a kind of nightmare, and Mr. Hire was going into a jeweller's shop, spending a quarter of an hour looking at rings and fingering them. He bought one with a turquoise, which they let him have cheap because there was a slight scratch on the stone. From the brightly-lit interior of the shop, he could see the pathetic nose and beard of the inspector, flattened against the window.

The jeweller, a thin, spry man, was staring hard at him, but waited until Mr. Hire had paid before asking: 'Aren't you young Hirovitch?'

'Yes!' he replied eagerly.

But the jeweller, closing the drawer of his till, merely said: 'Ah!'

And that 'ah' continued to ring in Mr. Hire's ears as he went along the street. That 'ah' made him feel uncomfortable, it weighed on him.

Why had the man said 'ah'?

Looking round, he once more caught sight of the inspector panting in his rear, and was no longer amused. On the contrary, he began to loathe the man, and he kept very close to the edge of the pavement, watching for the sound of the buses as they came up behind him.

He brought it off in the Place de la République. The traffic had piled up as far as the eye could see. The policeman was blowing his whistle. Taxis were hooting. At the very moment when, as though by a miracle, the mass began to break up, Mr. Hire jumped on the platform of a bus, while the inspector, surrounded by taxis, had no chance of running after it.

Mr. Hire got off at the Porte Saint-Martin, took another bus to the Gare du Nord, and walked down again from there along the Rue La Fayette to the Opéra.

Dark figures were streaming through the brightly-lit streets. He was carried with them in spite of himself.

Still nine hours to go!

But why had the Jew in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois said 'ah'?

Weariness came over Mr. Hire all at once, and he went into a cinema, guided through the darkness by the attendant with her little torch.

Someone was seated to his left, someone to his right, and everywhere there were rows of faces, half-revealed by the glow from the screen. It was hot. A woman's voice was uttering long sentences, amplified, more than human, and sometimes one heard her breathing in between the words, as though her breath were brushing past the thousands of spectators, while the lips moved in her gigantic face.

Mr. Hire sighed, settled down in his seat, stretched his short legs.

Wasn't it incredible, miraculous that he should be here, when the police were looking for him, when the people of Villejuif were accusing him of having murdered a prostitute?

And he was only filling in time! Hardly eight hours from now, he would be strolling up and down a platform at the Gare de Lyon, outside a compartment in which he would have kept seats. Two seats! Alice would come running at the last moment, because women were always late. He would beckon to her to hurry. He would hoist her up the steps.

Then they would sit gazing at each other while the wheels began to turn beneath their feet, running through the outskirts of Paris, past the tall suburban houses, the little tree-shaded villas, out into the open country.

He started, without knowing why, looked to the left and saw a surprised face turned towards him. To the right an old woman was staring at him in the same way, drawing back a little.

Perhaps because he was panting? But now he was calming down. He looked at the screen. He even made an effort to follow the film.

All the same, he heaved another sigh, a deep sigh that was both contented and impatient, for there are moments when such waiting is positively painful, when one's fingers stiffen as though with cramp, one's knees quiver, and one feels like laughing and groaning at the same time.

IX

THAT same day, at about ten in the morning, the concierge was astonished by the arrival of a neighbour with whom she was not even on speaking terms, bringing her little girl back from the nursery school. The child's neck was held stiffly and made to look longer by the bandage her mother had put round it that morning, because she had a sore throat. Her eyes were shining, her face pinched.

'They asked me to bring her home and to give you this.'

It was a note from the teacher: 'Your little girl has white spots in her throat and should be put to bed at once. I strongly advise you to send for the doctor.'

The concierge picked her daughter up, lifted her across the bucket and floor-cloth that lay in the doorway, and wondered where to put her, finally deposited her on a chair and drew it up close to the stove.

'Stay there!'

Never had there been so much rain. It tired one's eyes to watch it falling, splashing, trickling along the ground and making its way in everywhere, dirtying and soaking everything. In the courtyard the drain was choked up, and a pool was rapidly forming. The concierge finished wiping over her doorstep so that she could shut the door, and she could hear two men approaching from behind.

They were the police superintendent who had arrived in a taxi a quarter of an hour ago, and the inspector with whom he had been conferring. She had offered them the shelter of her lodge, but they had refused. They were pacing up and down the passage between the street and the courtyard, the collars of their overcoats turned up, hands in pockets, and their conversation

was broken by long pauses. Finally the superintendent crossed the pavement, and departed again in his taxi. A few seconds later, the inspector came into the lodge to warm his hands at the stove.

'He'll be back presently, with the examining magistrate and a search-warrant. '

And the concierge, kneeling on her wet threshold, looked up as she swabbed it with the floorcloth.

'Will you stay where I put you!' she cried shrilly to the little girl, who had slid off the chair.

The policeman on point duty at the cross-roads had put on his oilcloth cape with its pointed hood. Lorries were driving past him, their tarpaulins glistening, and pedestrians were hesitating to cross the road. Some of the market-women, standing beside their barrows, had put empty sacks over their heads and shoulders.

The dairy was one step below pavement-level, and all day, time had to be wasted in mopping up the water that came pouring in from the pavement. The proprietress was wearing clogs, and so was Alice. They were both equally irritable. Customers would pause in the doorway, see the water, and turn away.

'Just a minute!' the proprietress would call to them. 'We'll wipe the floor. Alice! Alice! . . .'

And as time went by, her voice became steadily sharper.

'You're clumsier than ever, to-day. You would be, of course . . .'

The dairy-woman was short and tubby, as fresh and sour as an apple. She stood near the door.

'Don't be afraid! I'll serve you from here.'

Alice really was clumsy, or absent-minded, at any rate, with a vague dejected air that was unusual in her. She was constantly caught gazing at the rain-spotted window, through which the passers-by looked unreal, as though reflected in a bad looking-glass.

'Alice!'

She would jump, drag her clogs across the floor, and weigh out butter or cheese.

'One franc forty-five.'

At half-past ten the inspector, having warmed himself in the lodge and buttoned his raincoat up to his chin, began to pace up and down the pavement again, and each time he came near the shop he gave Alice a long

look. Rain was streaming down his face, but it seemed to amuse him, to whip up his blood'

At ten to eleven the dairy-girl suddenly went out through the back door, which gave onto the courtyard.

'Alice! Where are you off to now?'

'To the lavatory,' she called back.

And when she reappeared, ten minutes later, she was breathing hard.

'You might have chosen a more convenient time. Hurry up! Madame Rorive is waiting to be served.'

A cyclist was knocked down by a lorry, a few yards from the policeman. He was carried to the corner café, his twisted bicycle left lying in the middle of the road. Alice paused in her weighing-out, to have a look. But before long the cyclist came limping back, half-dazed, his clothes covered with mud. Reeling like a drunkard, he staggered over to his machine, picked it up and went off, pushing it by the handlebars. Émile was at the door of the café. 'Shall I go and buy the meat?' asked Alice. 'Are you crazy? With six customers to be served?' And time dragged on, the rain kept falling, cars followed one another along the street. Emile had gone back into the *bistro* and every now and then rubbed his hand over the window to wipe away the steam and make sure Alice was not coming out.

'Shall I go now? You want three cutlets?'

She just flung her green coat over her shoulders, dashed out, and ran into the inspector, who was waiting at the corner. 'Not here!' she said. He went round the corner with her.

'I'll see you this evening, won't I? This may be my last day here.'

'Yes,' she murmured impatiently, looking towards the corner café. 'When?'

'I don't know. I'll tell you presently.'

And she rushed off down the pavement of the narrow shopping street, went into the butcher's, stood looking out into the street while she waited for the cutlets. When she came out again Émile was there but she could see the inspector at the corner of the main road. 'Careful!'

She stopped in front of the stationer's window and said very rapidly, without looking at her companion:

'I've put everything in his room! He wanted to go away with me and give you away.'

Already she had started to move off, because she felt the inspector was watching her. She smiled as she passed him and went back into the dairy, hung her coat on its hook, put the change into the drawer. 'How much?' asked her employer. 'Seven francs twenty-five.'

The little girl had at last been put to bed in a corner of the lodge, and now her face was scarlet, her eyes feverish, her breathing wheezy. Her brother had not gone back to school after lunch. 'Try and keep your sister amused!'

The concierge was exasperated. Everything was going wrong. The courtyard could only be crossed on planks laid on packing-cases and the plumber had not arrived. As if they were doing it on purpose, the men to read the gas and electric meters were promptly succeeded by other men with bills to be paid.

And now, at three o'clock, a car drew up in front of the house. The superintendent she had seen in the morning emerged from it, with a thin gentleman who wore a stiff collar nearly three inches high. The inspector hurried to meet them. And they were talking under the archway. It seemed their conversation would never end. At last the superintendent opened the glass-panelled door of the lodge.

'Have you a key?'

'No. Mr. Hire always takes it with him.'

The superintendent closed the door again, and a moment later the inspector turned up the collar of his raincoat and hurried out into the street.

The two men left behind didn't know what to do, or where to go. They walked a few steps, stopped, went on again, exchanged an occasional remark, stared curiously at the lodge, then at the flooded courtyard and the building on the far side. It was the thin man with the stiff collar who opened the door a second time.

'Excuse me, madame, you are quite certain, aren't you, that you let Mr. Hire in twice during the night of the crime? Think carefully. It is very important.

She was just putting a wet poultice on her daughter's neck.

'I think I'm certain.'

'Thinking is not enough.'

'Well then, I *am* certain that Mr. Hire's name was called twice.'

He did not look well. The superintendent was in a bad temper. This may have been due to the weather, for everyone's nerves were on edge to-day. There were sounds from the entrance. It was the inspector, coming back with a locksmith, and the four men started up the stairs.

'Oh, do be quiet!' shouted the concierge, slapping her little boy, who had opened his mouth to make some comment.

She could hear unaccustomed sounds. She went out of the lodge and found four or five people staring at the door as though expecting something.

'What do you want?'

But she was prevented from shutting the door. The dairy woman arrived, an old friend.

'Is it true that the magistrate's there and that they're going to arrest him?'

'I don't know!' wailed the concierge, on the verge of tears. 'I can assure you they don't bother to tell me! Jojo, don't let your sister get out of bed.'

The men stayed a long time upstairs, and two old women who lived on the third floor came down anxiously, asking for news. It seemed as interminable and disturbing as when a doctor remains closeted with a patient and one hears him coming and going without being able to guess what he is doing.

Alice was not there. She had been left in charge of the dairy. The chauffeur, at the wheel of the car, was looking disdainfully at the bystanders.

At last the inspector came down, but he was no longer the good-natured young man who used to help the concierge to make coffee. He was in a hurry, and hadn't so much as a glance for anyone.

'Where can I go to telephone?'

'To the bar at the corner. That's the nearest.'

And he hurried away with an air of importance, leaving a trail of mystery in his wake. He went past Émile, into the telephone booth, calling his order on the way:

'Glass of rum! Quickly.'

Nobody could hear what he said. The superintendent and the magistrate were still up in the house, and the locksmith now came out with his tool-box slung over his shoulder.

The gas-lamps had just been lit. The cars had switched on their lights too, but it was not quite dark yet. The concierge would let only tenants into her lodge, three women, standing in the dusky room, round the stove.

Nothing happened. It was still raining. The street-lamps were reflected in long zig-zags, which looked like live snakes on the wet ground. The plumber chose to arrive at this moment, and had to be taken into the courtyard, shown where the drain was, provided with a chair, and then a pair of pliers and a torch. He didn't seem to be able to do anything by himself. The concierge was hardly back in her lodge before he called her again.

At five o'clock another car stopped outside the door, and four men emerged and came towards the lodge.

The superintendent appeared from the staircase and led the four of them away, without a word.

It was the time when the tenants began to arrive home, and as their womenfolk were in the passage or the lodge they, too, paused there, and then went to look out along the street.

The superintendent stationed two of his men at the tram-stop, since that was the way Mr. Hire usually came back; one a little beyond the house, and one at the street corner. He had the cars driven a distance of about a hundred yards, so that they would not attract attention.

'Please don't collect here,' he said as he came back into the passage; 'I want the house to look just as usual.'

He did not glance at anyone in particular. He went slowly and heavily upstairs. In the corner bar, Émile was drinking one small glass of rum after another, now and then going over to the window, wiping it with his hand, and pressing his forehead against the glass.

Everybody was waiting for the same thing. In spite of the rain, a dozen inquisitive spectators had gathered on the pavement. People went up to peer at the plain-clothes inspectors whom the superintendent had positioned, and they angrily turned their backs. Even the policeman on point duty came across to them, touched his hood, and winked.

'Got him, eh? Is it the fat little chap with the curly moustache? He's never home before seven o'clock, you know.'

The trams, nearly empty a short time ago, were now packed, and the two inspectors divided the task of taking a look at everyone who got out. At seven o'clock the superintendent came down himself, took a turn round the cross-roads, broke up one group, which formed again ten yards further along.

Five, six trams arrived at the stop. The passengers who got out scurrying off through the rain. A quarter-past seven came, twenty past, twenty-five past.

The little bearded inspector appeared, looking meek and dejected, at Police Headquarters, and asked the office-boy:

'Is the chief here?'

'He's gone to Villejuif to make an arrest.'

At eight o'clock the trams were almost empty, but the inspector emerged from one of them and gazed at his colleagues with eyes of dread.

'Where's the super?'

'He's just gone back to the room.'

He did not walk, he ran, breathlessly, and his lips were moving as though he were trying to speak. He rushed past the group of people standing round the door of the lodge, stumbled on the bottom step of the stairs, recovered himself, and tore on. Doors half opened. Though so small, he was making a considerable din. At last he knocked on the door of the room. The superintendent himself opened it.

They had been waiting placidly in the fireless room and had kept their overcoats on. The magistrate was seated in the only armchair, with his feet close to the cold stove. The other inspector was leaning against the table, cleaning his nails.

'Well?'

'I lost him. He spent a funny kind of day. First of all he went to his office, but after taking his parcels to the post, as he does every day, he . . .'

In the dairy, Alice was bending down, mopping up the water with a cloth. Her head was turned towards the open door, and her blouse hung slightly open, showing the hollow of shade between her breasts.

Suddenly she straightened up. Someone was staring at her. A man was standing quite close to her, in a black overcoat, under which she could see a white shirt-front and a black bow-tie.

'I'd like . . .'

He pointed to a cheese, while she wiped her hands on her apron.

'How much is that?'

He held out his hand to pay, put an envelope into Alice's hand as well as the money, and went quickly away. Once outside, he hung about a bit, looked at the house next door and tried to hear what the groups of

bystanders were saying, but as a tram was just about to leave he rushed after it and jumped aboard at the last moment.

The superintendent and the magistrate came across the pavement, while their car drove up. The magistrate got into it by himself, and the superintendent dashed into the *bistro* and made for the telephone booth. One of the lodgers from the house was in there at the moment, telephoning for the doctor, because the little girl was breathing with a noise that was painful to hear.

'You can shut the shop!' called the dairy woman from the doorway. Alice pulled down the shutter and went to the room behind the shop to fetch the iron bars.

Some of the tenants decided to go in to dinner, but they were downstairs almost at once. The road was almost deserted, and so shiny that the occasional car was reflected on its surface. The bell of a cinema more than three hundred yards away could be heard, and a few people who didn't know what was afoot went by without stopping.

As she was going into the house, Alice met the inspector, who said very quickly, in an undertone:

'I'll try to come to your room a bit later on. Don't lock the door.' And he gave her a friendly smile.

Mr. Hire was not sleepy. In any case he would not have had the patience to go into a room, undress and get into bed. He came out of the cinema with the warm crowd all around him, and he went along with it, walking amid light and noise, pausing with the others on the edge of a pavement, going on again with hurried steps when the rest went on.

But the flow gradually diminished, and gaps appeared, as people vanished down shadowy side-streets or into the Métro. Gaps began to appear, too, in the row of brightly-lit shop-fronts. Mr. Hire walked faster, eager for the morning, eager to be at the station. So eager that he was half running, his short arms waggling at his sides.

He was not hungry or thirsty. What he wanted was to preserve the kind of warm excitement that pervaded him, the wave on which he was borne along, and he turned into an entrance from which soft music could be heard, and pushed open the padded door of a dance-hall.

His nostrils twitched with joy, with voluptuous triumph. The light was dazzling. There were splashes of red everywhere, on the wails, on the ceiling, in the boxes, and there were naked bodies, painted in brilliant colours.

There was a great deal of noise; or rather, not noise so much as a volume of sound like the crashing of waves, interspersed with the joyous wailing of the brass.

He sat down, smiling, as dazed as a girl tired out with waltzing. He needed to get his breath back. He looked vaguely round, and saw women, most of them young, shop-girls, factory-girls, typists, as excited as he was himself, talking feverishly, jumping up, sitting down, dancing, running.

' A ... a kummel!' he told the waiter.

He was touched and softened by a surge of infinite kindliness, as he gazed without realizing it, at a charming little creature who was sitting with another girl a few yards away from him. She was skinny. She had a pointed face, thin lips, green eyes and flaxen hair. She wore a red-and-blue striped jersey, stretched across her little breasts, which were widely separated and longer than their width, like unripe pears.

She had a special flair for guessing, from a distance, even right across the hall, which of the men wanted to dance with her, and she would get up at once and go to meet him, both arms extended, while her legs, like match-sticks began to move to the rhythm of the music. Whenever she went past her friend she would put out her tongue at her, over the man's shoulder.

Mr. Hire was smiling at his own thoughts, not only smiling with his lips, but beaming all over his face. He smiled as he looked at the girl, and when she sat down again she stared at him, frowning, and nudged her friend with her elbow.

Neither of them laughed. It was no use turning his head away, he could still fed their disapproving, suspicious eyes fixed on him. He had not done anything. He had not said anything. He had only been basking in the cheerful atmosphere.

And the next time she got up to dance, the girl pointed Mr. Hire out to her partner, who stared at him with contempt.

He didn't know where to look. He had not touched his kummel. He beckoned to the waiter, who came up without a word.

'How much?'

He puffed out his chest. With an air of importance, he produced his pocket-book. While waiting for his change he twirled his moustache, and, standing up, he emptied his glass at one draught, which gave him a slight feeling of nausea.

There was no one on the pavement outside. The lights of Montmartre began a little further on. Mr. Hire shook himself, not to scatter the raindrops that were falling on his shoulders, but to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling that lingered, like a bad taste in the mouth. He could still picture the girl in the sweater clearly. What harm had he done her? And since she laughed with everyone else, why not laugh with him?

A gold-braided doorkeeper armed with a red umbrella intercepted Mr. Hire and steered him towards the entrance of a nightclub!

'This way for the gayest place in Montmartre! Champagne is not compulsory.'

Mr. Hire was afraid to go in, but he was equally afraid to refuse, and he was already being eased out of his overcoat when he remembered the Government Bonds, took it hastily back from the attendant's hands, and declared firmly:

'I'll keep it on.'

'It's very hot inside, sir. But of course if you prefer . . .'

It was only one o'clock in the morning. The superintendent, fully dressed, was asleep on Mr. Hire's bed, while the inspector stood at the window, trying to convey a message to Alice in dumb-show:

'See you later!'

She didn't understand him. Standing in the middle of her room, she shrugged to show that she was baffled ; then, wearying of his antics, she pulled her dress over her head, took off her slip and her wet stockings, and rubbed her bare feet with a towel to warm them.

X

AT four o'clock the rain stopped and a strong west wind began to sweep through the empty streets. The superintendent sat up on Mr. Hire's bed, rubbing his eyes, and then rose reluctantly to his feet.

'Your turn now!' he said to the inspector. 'What time is it?'

He stretched from head to foot to rouse himself. His jacket was creased across the back. While his subordinate lay down on the bed, he automatically opened the cardboard box they had found in the depths of the wardrobe, which contained the murdered woman's handbag, a cheap bag decorated with a stag's head badge, and a shabby silk lining smudged with face-powder.

'You'll wake me, won't you?'

The superintendent was staring at the bag with heavy, sleepy eyes, his hand fumbling inside it, among the banknotes, the powder-puff, the lipstick and an almost full packet of cigarettes.

'Either this chap is damn clever, or else he's an imbecile,' he grunted, putting the bag away again.

And he filled a pipe, gazing out at the sky, where grey and white clouds were racing across a moon-lit expanse.

Mr. Hire was seated in front of a bottle of champagne, obstinately repeating:

'No, I assure you. You're wasting your time!'

His neighbour, not yet daunted, sat smoking a cigarette and leaning on the man's shoulder, one of her breasts pressed against him.

'You're flesh and blood like anyone else, aren't you?'

'I'm engaged to be married!'

It was the first time he had put it into words. It impressed him so much that he could not understand the woman's persistence. 'What difference does that make?'

'No!'

In the end she stood up, weary and scornful. 'You can bet she does the dirty on you, your girl-friend!' But she did not even wince. The nightclub was practically empty. Mr. Hire was sitting right in a corner, and the musicians gazed gloomily at him, wondering when he would take himself off.

'Waiter!'

For a moment they felt hopeful. 'I want to write a letter.'

'I don't know if we've got. . .' the man growled, as he departed. He went and spoke to the manager, looking at Mr. Hire from a distance. The two women who had stayed on until now, put their coats and hats on, shook hands with the musicians, and left. At last the waiter returned with a little

bottle of purple ink, a cheap penholder, a sheet of squared paper and an envelope.

'We're closing in five minutes,' he announced. The saxophonist threw a questioning glance at the manager, and the latter shook his head. Not worth playing anymore! The musicians could put their instruments away and go.

The pen spluttered, jabbing into the rough paper.

'To the Public Prosecutor.

'I have the honour to inform you that the Villejuif murder was committed by a young man from that district who works, I believe, in a garage and whose Christian name is Émile. I do not know his surname or his address, but I may add that he goes to the Colombes football-ground every Sunday. He is of medium height and usually wears a pinkish-brown felt hat.

'I remain, sir, your very obedient servant.'

Without adding his signature, he addressed the envelope and then called for a stamp. When the letter reached its destination he and Alice would already be a long way away.

'A hundred and fifty francs!' rapped out the waiter, whose patience was exhausted.

The cobbles were already beginning to dry off in places, and above the level of the streets the wind could be heard whistling among the tiled roofs. Now and then a cart went rattling slowly on its way, and the footsteps of a passer-by echoed right through the whole district.

There were ten or a dozen people huddled outside the gates at the Gare de Lyon. Some of them had put down their luggage and were sitting on it, dozing. Behind them in the closed, empty station, an engine whistled from time to time.

It was very cold. Just down the road, lights were turned on in a little bar. A man with a lantern was making the round of the waiting-rooms, opening doors, shutting others, pushing things that clanged.

Mr. Hire was so tired that he felt giddy, but that would pass; it was the hardest moment of all, the transition from night to day. He closed his eyes for a minute or two, and that was sheer luxury, for his lids were burning. He smiled vaguely at his own thoughts.

From inside the station, steps approached the gate. A key squeaked. Iron bars were drawn back, and the dishevelled slumberers rose and advanced

into the dark hall which yawned ahead of them. Only one booking-office was lit up. Mr. Hire was the first to notice it, and had to wait while the clerk changed his coat and filled his fountain-pen.

'Two second-class tickets for Geneva.'

'Return?'

'No, single.'

All of a sudden he was shivering. His fingers trembled as he searched in his pocket-book.

'The train is at five-forty-four, isn't it?'

'Forty-three.'

And the clerk was staring at him gravely, staring at his moustache, his hands, his pocket-book. He even bent forward to watch as Mr. Hire went skipping away and into the refreshment-room. The station was beginning to fill up. A waiter was arranging *croissants* in little baskets, while another sprinkled semi-circles of sawdust on the floor.

At ten minutes past five two men had sat down in a corner of the refreshment-room, and one of them re-reading a slip of paper he was holding, was whispering:

''That's him.'

Mr. Hire looked at the clock, then at the door, then back at the clock, and then at his watch.

'How much?'

His voice was sharp and decided.

'The Geneva train is in now, I suppose?'

'Platform three.'

But first of all he went and looked out into the street. It was not yet light. It was not even beginning to get light, and yet the sky looked paler, perhaps because of the moon; and the first trams, the taxis converging on the station, the lights burning in the bars, showed that night was already at an end.

In the other railway stations too, men with Mr. Hire's description in their pockets were staring at the travellers.

The train was a long one. It stretched out beyond the glass-roofed interior to the end of the platform, where it was colder. Mr. Hire had chosen his compartment and his two seats. And now he was standing on the platform, overcome by the solemnity of the moment.

The minute-hand on the huge clock jerked forward every sixty seconds, a whirr of mechanism accompanying each jerk. The platform was filling up.

Train attendants were hurrying about, and so were a newsvendor and a man pushing a trolley with chocolate and lemonade.

At five-forty, when the train shook itself as though trying its strength before the departure, Mr. Hire felt his knees begin to tremble, and rose on tiptoe to look over the heads of the crowd. All of a sudden he rushed forward, panting, muttering to himself in his joy, for he had caught sight of a green hat. But when he came within ten yards of it he saw it belonged to a plump little woman with a baby in her arms, who was being helped up into a third-class carriage.

The two inspectors were on the alert to prevent him from leaving. Like Mr. Hire they were craning their necks to look along the platform, wondering who was to arrive.

No one arrived. The engine whistled. A porter ran past, slamming the doors. Mr. Hire had not given up hope. He was so tense that he ached all over. Wasn't this how he had imagined the departure? He had always expected that Alice would come tearing up at the last moment and that he would have to help her to jump on the step while the train was moving. His foot was tapping the ground. He was grimacing and smiling all at once, with tears of impatience in his eyes.

And suddenly he had the impression that the platform had begun to move. It was not the platform. It was the train that was starting, gradually gathering speed. Doors glided past, with faces looking out, handkerchiefs waving.

Hands in pockets, he swung his shoulders as he walked, to work off his despair.

'Ticket please!'

Mr. Hire proffered his, and was called back.

'This isn't a platform ticket. It's . . .'

'I know, I know!'

And the ticket-collector stared inquisitively at the back of the black overcoat, the velvet collar, the shaky little legs that were moving away.

Mr. Hire felt very much like crying. He stood on the steps at the main entrance, looking down into the square, where the stones were gradually whitening.

He did not know what was the matter with him. It was a complex sensation. He was cold, subtly, queerly cold, as though icy needles were pricking into him, though his skin was damp. He was frightened. He

thought of the letter he had posted, of Émile, of the policemen who would begin walking behind him again, of the superintendent who would say things that hurt like blows. He was hungry. Hungry or thirsty, he didn't know which. And hot too. He didn't feel steady on his feet, but he hadn't the courage to go and sit down again in the refreshment-room.

Perhaps Alice was late? Perhaps Émile had prevented her from leaving? Perhaps she would turn up any moment now?

He looked at everyone who got out of the taxis that kept drawing up within a few yards of him. And people looked at him, for he really had the air of a policeman on the watch.

Six o'clock. The sky was growing steadily paler. Buses were hurtling along the streets, and he could not summon up courage to leave. He paced about a little, went down a few steps, then came up again.

'Perhaps she couldn't find a taxi!'

And he began to calculate the time it would take to come in from Villejuif by tram.

His impatience worked its way down from his chest to his stomach and then to his bladder, and he had to withdraw; after which he made a tour of the station, for Alice might have arrived while he had been away.

At half-past six all the street lamps in Paris went out. It was daylight. The wind sent scraps of paper fluttering along the empty pavements, where the rain lay in puddles here and there.

Mr. Hire left the station and went into a bar. He chose the smallest and shabbiest he could see, one with tiled walls. One elbow propped on the counter, he drank some coffee and tried to eat a *croissant*, but pushed it away almost untouched. When he went out into the street again, he noticed two men standing at the edge of the pavement. He walked on for a hundred yards or so, turned on his heel, and saw the two men behind him.

He began to walk so fast, without knowing why, that people turned to stare after him. He seemed dizzy, panic-stricken. He rushed down the steps of the first Métro station, and the two men followed him onto the platform.

The letter had gone. It would reach its destination at noon. Alice, since she had not come to the station, must be doing her milk-round. She wore clogs in the morning, but left them at the foot of the stairs in each house and went up in her green list slippers, so as not to make a noise. She hadn't washed yet. She went upstairs to wash and tidy herself about eight o'clock,

after getting her employer's breakfast. But in the daytime she could hardly be seen because the courtyard was so dark and the window-panes so dirty.

The Métro kept stopping and starting again. Mr. Hire forgot to look at the names of the stations. However, when they reached Italie he got out, from sheer force of habit.

While he was underground, Paris had had time to come back to life. Endless files of lorries and cars were following one another into the city, and trains were disgorging packed loads of workmen and office employees, chiefly workmen, for the offices open later.

What was he going to do? Alice hadn't come! He did not even ask himself whether she loved him or not. He had never asked himself that. He had only wondered whether he was to have her, for himself. And he had shown her the eighty thousand francs.

It was not from cynicism, but from humility. Yet she hadn't come, in spite of the Government Bonds, and now he didn't understand anything, he was out of his depth; he remembered, without knowing why the little girl in the red-and-blue striped jersey who had stared at him suspiciously, and then with a kind of anger. Why?

He stood waiting for a Villejuif tram, and could still see his two sleuths. He felt sad again now, no longer impatient, but sad, with a sadness that was as warm and secret as tears. This was the time of day when, in the Rue Saint-Antoine, he used to begin hanging the reach-me-downs on their rods and stopping the passers-by. In the prison, where one got up early, this was the hour of the walk round the yard, one behind the other, in silence, ears straining to catch the sounds of Paris awakening on the far side of the walls.

His overcoat was soaked right through at the shoulders, and felt icy cold. A tram drew up. It was empty, as all trams bound for the suburbs are empty in the early morning. The conductor recognized Mr. Hire, and then glanced at the two men who sat down a little further along.

The scenery went past, always the same, the wholesale chemist's on the left, then the huge soap advertisement, then the gentle rise where road-repairs were always going on.

Mr. Hire could feel that he was pale. His eyelids were prickling but he was afraid to lower them, as though he would be in danger of falling asleep. And though he had eaten nothing, he felt rather sick.

He saw the street that led to the big house with the tiled walls, where the corridors were misty from the steam of the baths. He thought of it without

the slightest attraction. He even felt a kind of revulsion.

'Ticket, please?'

He always had a book of tram tickets in his pocket, and a book of Métro tickets as well. He knew the price of each trip.

'Thank you.'

He had a feeling that something was missing. He looked down at his knees and realized that it was his black leather briefcase. This flabbergasted him. Chiefly because he, with his prodigious memory, could not think where he had left it.

It didn't matter. There was nothing important in it. But he turned his mind in that direction, straining all his faculties that way.

Where had he left it? Why wasn't it lying flat on his lap, as usual?

To begin with he had to make an effort to think about it, but soon he was in a frenzy. He was determined to remember! He wrinkled his forehead! He frowned! He pressed his lips together and stared ferociously into space!

Alice got down first and helped the proprietress to pour the contents of the three milk-cans into the bottles and cover them with a round of blue paper. The dairy was not open yet, the shutters were still up, and the floor was half flooded with rainwater. 'Hurry up and get the place clean by seven o'clock.' There were two men on the watch outside, and the corner *bistro*, the one on the right, was already lit up. From a distance Alice recognized Émile, who must have been up all night; he had a small glass of rum next to his coffee.

Her dress was still wet from the day before, and hung stiffly to her shins. Lorries were coming back empty from the central market. On the country side of the house everything was wetter than in the direction of Paris, because fields take longer to dry than cobblestones, and trees go on dripping for hours.

As she was leaving a bottle of milk outside a first-floor flat, the door opened and a man asked, razor in hand. 'Have they arrested him?'

'Not yet.'

The concierge called her as she came down again. She had spent a dreadful night, for she kept thinking her little girl had stopped breathing. Then she would switch on the light and see the child's congested face and dilated nostrils. She would switch off the light again and listen to the child's

breathing before she dropped off to sleep, only to wake with a start a little later on and strain her ears in vain. She was pale. Her hair was all unkempt. 'Are they still there?' she asked pointing upstairs.

'I noticed the light was on.'

'Is it still raining?'

'No. But there's a wind.'

And Alice went on her round of the neighbouring houses, getting back to the dairy with a load of empty bottles just as the proprietress was taking down the shutters.

The inspector had just come down and was looking at her through the window, as though waiting for her.

'They're still there!' her employer said, just as the concierge had done.

The inspector was smiling and making signs that the dairy-girl could not understand. He was trying to explain that he had not been able to come to her room, but hoped for better luck next time. There was a stubble of beard on his cheeks. Suddenly the proprietor of the *bistro* came out, in the blue apron he always wore in the morning, and took the inspector back into the bar.

'You can turn the light off now,' called the dairy woman, from the back room.

It was practically daylight. Only the *bistro* and the trams still had their lights on. Émile could no doubt see Alice through the shop window, and as she watched, he ordered another coffee and rum.

Then the inspector came running back, found the dairy-girl on the doorstep, and called out as he went by:

'He's coming!'

'What is it?' shrilled the dairy woman.

'Mr. Hire's coming!'

The concierge appeared in the doorway, anxious-eyed, standing on tiptoe to look for Alice.

'I think they're going to arrest him! Just as I'm expecting the doctor!'

Doors were opening and shutting all over the house. The first-floor tenant was staring out into the street, in both directions.

'Is he really coming?'

'Georges, wait for me!' cried a voice from higher up.

And the butcher came out of the *bistro*, said something to a man who offered him a cigarette, and came towards the house with him, stopping a

few steps from the door. The concierge looked anxiously at him.

'What is it?'

'They're going to arrest him!'

He himself stopped a van which was just going past, driven by a friend of his.

'Come and see what's going on!'

A woman came down, followed by another.

'Is it true?'

'What?'

'They've got proof. They've found the handbag. They're going to arrest him!'

From the doorway they could see one policeman waiting at the tram stop and another who seemed to be wanting to close the side-street.

'Alice! There's the floor to mop up.'

'Coming.'

She went back reluctantly, took a cloth from behind the back door, and plunged her hands into the cold water, which turned them scarlet. The inspector, who had gone up to speak to the superintendent, came down again at once.

'Don't collect here, please! There's nothing to see. Nothing at all!'

There were ten of them now, then twelve, and others were coming along from the *bistro* and elsewhere. Émile came up, smoking a cigarette, but he remained on the outskirts of the group, as though preferring not to be seen.

Drivers turned to look as they went past, wondering why the crowd had gathered when there was no sign of an accident. The policeman on point duty kept his eyes riveted on the house as he directed the traffic.

'Please, please!' cried the inspector, who could not get himself obeyed. 'You'll upset everything.'

The superintendent was alone in Mr. Hire's room. The handbag lay on the table. All that could be heard from here was the sound of cars on the road, and a woman yelling at her children because they were taking too long to get dressed.

'Move on, there! You're interfering with the work of the police.'

A tram drew up. The policeman watching at the tram-stop made a signal that everyone understood just as clearly as the inspector.

'Here he is!'

Alice was washing the doorstep and she went on swirling her floorcloth around on the blue stone.

XI

THE inspector was running upstairs to warn his chief, when Mr. Hire was seen coming round the end of the tram. At this distance he looked tiny, all round and black, with his moustache making an inky line across his colourless face.

Two men were walking behind him, so close that they seemed to be supporting him on either side. And Mr. Hire's little legs were twinkling along as though to get away from them.

He had noticed the crowd. He could not have failed to notice it, for there were generally few people about at this time of day. He halted at the edge of the pavement. He was the only person waiting to cross, except for the two policemen at his heels, but the man on point duty blew his whistle and held out his baton to stop the line of traffic.

He came on. He was walking in a cloud, in some soft, impalpable, invisible substance. All he could see was the doorway of his house, and people standing round it, all staring in the same direction. All he could hear was the tread of the two men just behind him.

The crowd on the pavement had suddenly increased. People were coming from inside and from outside the house, men, women and even children, the latter being pushed to the back.

'Stay there, do you hear?'

And Mr. Hire went on and on; he was afraid to look into the dairy, but he saw Alice out of the corner of his eye, as she flicked her cloth around the doorstep. He swelled out his chest. He would make the position clear, now. One of his nostrils was blocked up by a cold and he was breathing with difficulty, but that did not matter.

The important thing was to get past, and there was a narrow space between the people and the door. All he need do was to hurry.

And hurry he did, for ten or fifteen paces. Then, suddenly, he saw a movement close beside him, and at the same time his bowler hat flew off his head, while the crowd began to titter.

Then he made a mistake. Instinctively, without thinking, he tried to pick up his hat. Whereupon someone's foot sent it rolling further and, as though

by accident, also hit Mr. Hire in the face, muddying and bruising him.

This was a shock to both sides—a shock for Mr. Hire who, as he gathered himself together, turned bewildered eyes on the crowd; and a shock, or rather a signal, for the spectators.

Mr. Hire staggered, and almost touched a woman with his elbow. The nearest man made this an excuse to hit him back with a clenched fist.

The fist, as it met Mr. Hire's body, made a curious sound, an exciting sound, that made everybody want to hear it again.

He had lost his balance, his sense of direction. He stood on tiptoe, because they were nearly all taller than he, and protected his face with one bent arm.

'Here! Let him alone!' said a policeman.

But there were at least thirty people barring the way. Mr. Hire was pushed against the stone door-jamb. A stone hit him on the hand, drawing blood. A sharp kick caught his shin.

A clamour began to rise from the crowd, while he still hid his face from it with the black sleeve of his overcoat.

He could see nothing. He moved backwards simply because he was driven, by fists or by feet. He felt the panels of the door against his hand, the flagstone of the passage beneath his feet.

He began running as fast as his legs would carry him, leapt up the stairs and tried to push a half-open door, which was slammed in his face.

The clamour followed him. People were coming up behind him, and he ran on and on panting, and wild-eyed. The walls, the banisters, the doors looked unfamiliar. He was hunting for a way out, and had lost count of the storeys he had climbed.

A door opened and he did not even recognize it as his own. A man tried to bar the way, but he got past his legs, he could not have said how. He went up and up, amid unknown surroundings. He had never been so far up. An old woman was leaning over the landing above, trembling, and clasped her hands together.

He thrust past her, and in at her door. The stairs did not go any higher. There was a cooking-stove, a table, an unmade bed.

'Kill him!'

They were shouting that. They were yelling all kinds of things. There was a general hubbub, through which one loud voice tried to make itself heard:

'Let him alone! Leave this to the police!'

Then he did something he would never have attempted in cold blood. Above his head, in the sloping ceiling, there was a skylight. He caught hold of the edge and hung on. The zinc rim cut into his hands, but he kicked about, swung his legs, hooked one of them over the edge of the skylight. He was out on the roof at the very moment when the first pursuers rushed into the attic, where the old woman was yelling blue murder.

It was a weird roof! He opened wide his eyes. He was afraid. Some of the tiles were dry, others still wet. They all sloped down horribly, and nothing could be seen except a stretch of waste ground, far away, beyond the edge of the roof.

He balanced there for a longish moment, arms outstretched, eyes wild. A hand reached up through the skylight and tried to grab his leg. Did he draw away? In any case he gave a start, fell forward, slipped, slid, and caught with both hands at something that swayed.

Then, with all the strength he could muster, he uttered a cry that was no longer human, a cry that tore his throat. His feet, his whole body, were dangling in space. His hands were hurting. There was a pull on his arms.

He moved his feet. He was trying to find a hold. And his feet met nothing, his body hung inert, his arms felt as though they would break.

He did not scream again. He held his breath. He looked at the brick wall close against him, and at the zinc cornice just above, on which his fingers were cutting themselves.

The cornice was giving way! It was bending! It had dropped about a quarter of an inch. And voices could be heard above—from the skylight, no doubt.

There were no more threats. The voices were low, anxious.

The whole thing was going to break! He dared not look down again. And his hands were so damp that they would slip any moment now. His blood seemed to have frozen. He could not move. He could only see his hands, his own hands, whose swollen veins made them unrecognizable, and the breath he drew in was like fire.

To get a better view, they had crossed over to the waste plot opposite, and cars were still passing along the road, between them and the house. They could see the steeply sloping roof with its patches of wet tiles, the faces at

the skylight, and even the head and shoulders of a uniformed policeman, just emerging from it.

The new, brick front of the house was smooth, without a single projection. A long strip of cornice had given way under Mr. Hire's weight and was sagging like a garland, with his body hanging in the middle, so stiff, now, that he might have been dead.

The superintendent was one of the group he had not even seen. The policeman, up above, signalled to his chief, who waved his arm in a negative gesture.

The policeman could not possibly get down without slipping in his turn onto the cornice which would then give way completely.

There must be a lot of coming and going inside the house. There was an active group in the old woman's attic, another on the waste plot.

One car stopped, its driver catching sight of the black form hanging in space. Others car followed suit.

'Go and call the fire brigade,' ordered the superintendent.

A window opened just below the body. Mr. Hire must have seen a man within six feet of him, but the man could do nothing and just said to him, for what it was worth:

'Hold on!'

They had found a rope somewhere. The policeman, assisted by the plumber who had called the previous day, was lowering it down the roof. The superintendent was directing him from afar:

'Left! ... A bit more! . . . No, not so much. That's it!'

And the rope, writhing like a snake, reached the cornice and swept past Mr. Hire's face. But he did not grasp it. Perhaps he was afraid to let go? Did he feel he could not hang on with one hand, even for a second?

At the cross-roads, life had come to a standstill. The road was blocked with cars. The policeman was staring upwards like everyone else, and now and then some far-distant driver, who did not know, sounded his horn impatiently.

All the same, the whole thing only looked, from above, like a few black patches, a few compact groups, with some scattered individuals moving about in the space between them.

'Is the fire brigade coming?'

'In three minutes.'

The pavement, below Mr. Hire, was empty.

The doctor, who had just arrived, was waiting at the corner of the street, where the concierge had joined him.

'Would anyone ever have expected that!'

Alice was standing on the waste ground, a couple of yards from the inspector, who risked a smile at her from time to time.

'Ah! . . .' gasped the crowd, as Mr. Hire's overcoat worked up on the back of his neck. It looked as though he would let go. They saw him shudder, draw up a little, then relax. Sometimes his legs, swung apart then his knees pressed together convulsively, and all the time the rope was hanging about four inches from his nose.

They could not see his face: only his back and his legs, above all, his legs, which were never still, which groped desperately to find a foothold.

Close to Alice, too, stood Émile, his hands in his pockets, his face sickly and cold. She gazed at him, but he did not notice her. His eyes were burning. His neck was stiff with staring upwards, while she was looking round at the bystanders. Someone began giving figures. 'The house is seventy feet high.'

And never had the walls looked so bare, so lofty, so smooth, or the pavement so hard. A bell came ringing through the packed, stationary cars, but it was only the ambulance, arriving before the firemen, and it stopped just in front of the door, hardly five yards from the spot where Mr. Hire would fall.

There was general relief when the fire brigade's bell was heard at last. But then tension returned, for everyone realized that this was the end. Perhaps some were even secretly hoping there would be a tragedy after all?

Mr. Hire hung inert, swaying almost imperceptibly, as though blown by the wind.

Heedless of spectators and police, the fireman took possession of the cross-roads. Twenty or thirty of them were bustling round a red-painted machine, and a ladder emerged from this, climbed, lengthened, reached the third floor, then the fourth.

Émile, as white as a sheet, was still staring upwards, his trembling hand clenched round a cigarette-lighter in his pocket.

Alice first looked at him, then looked at the inspector, and ventured an occasional glance at the pale sky, whose harsh light hurt her eyes, or towards the brick front of the house.

A brass-helmeted fireman began rushing into space up the ladder even before it was fully extended. It sagged under his weight, as though this were a circus act. The last section was run out, and once again Mr. Hire's feet swung apart and came together, and he half turned his head, showing one side of his moustache.

Everything was silent, except for one big car, which was obstinately threading its way through the traffic block. The people at the skylight could see nothing, and were making signs to ask what was going on.

The fireman was drawing nearer. Six feet. Three feet. Three rungs. Two. One . . .

He put an arm round Mr. Hire's waist, and visibly had to make an effort to induce him to let go. As he came down the highest rungs the body was still moving, as though in protest, and then it lay limp.

Lower down, the swaying of the ladder diminished. Towards the bottom it was as steady as a flight of stairs, and everyone rushed forward simultaneously, while the police tried to join hands and form a cordon.

Two rungs. One rung. The fireman had reached the ground with his burden. Its head was dangling. Alice, in the crowd, gripped Émile by the wrist. People ventured to whisper again, then to speak out loud. The sound increased.

'Silence!'

And they laid Mr. Hire's inert body on the edge of the pavement, while the concierge's doctor made his way through the crowd. The face was waxen. The waistcoat had worked up, revealing his striped shirt and braces.

All sound ceased, except that of the winch as it wound the ladder down, section by section.

'He's dead. Heart failure . . .' said the doctor, straightening up.

The superintendent was not the only one to hear him. People were craning forward. Mr. Hire no longer existed. There was only a dead man, whose eyes had just been closed. There were red bloodstains on his outspread hands.

'Move them on! Bring up the ambulance!'

The ambulance rang its bell, and the crowd reluctantly made way. The concierge was right at the back, and did not know what to do. She paced to and fro behind everybody else, not daring to come nearer.

Émile worked his way forward to the third row, then to the second, and his little eyes made dark holes in his thin face.

Now and then, Alice squeezed his arm. He paid no attention. He was watching. He didn't want to miss anything. The body was put on a stretcher and two men lifted it up.

'Émile!' whispered the girl.

He stared at her, coldly, surprised to see her there.

'What's the matter?'

He turned his head away.

'You aren't jealous, are you? You don't imagine that . . .'

Then, with sudden eagerness:

'It's not true! I didn't need to do anything at all, Émile, I swear I didn't!'

She leant her breast on his arm.

'Don't you believe me? Do you think I'm lying?'

He freed himself, to take out a cigarette, and light it. People were beginning to scatter. The ambulance rang its bell, preparing to drive off. The cars began to move.

'I swear it!' she repeated.

And a yard away she saw the dairy window, with the proprietress waiting for her. The inspector was supervising the break-up of the crowd, and she passed close by him, but he did not smile at her. His face was pale and he was frowning.

Everyone was going away, shamefaced! The concierge ran along: beside the doctor, saying:

'I wonder if it isn't diphtheria, and ...'

'Here I am!' cried Alice, hurrying into the shop and picking up the bucket and floorcloth she had left on the doorstep. 'I can't be in two places at once!'

Standing on the step of the red vehicle as it tore back towards Paris, the fireman was explaining:

'He went limp in my arms, up there, as though he'd suddenly fainted. I knew that was the end of him.'

And there was great excitement at Villejuif, because all that little world was two hours late.

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